

Advancing the Knowledge of Vietnam's Toxic Legacy



SOUTHEAST ASIA



An estimated 20 million gallons of Agent Orange were used by U.S. troops during the Vietnam War to clear dense vegetation to better track North Vietnamese troops, as well as destroy their crops. The use of Agent Orange as a defoliant and herbicide in Vietnam was the largest chemical warfare operation in history, producing considerable ecological as well as public health damage. Research conducted by Dr. Linda Schwartz, research scientist at YSN, revealed that exposure to Agent Orange has increased rates of cancer and miscarriage in women who served during the war and high rates of birth defects in their children. Today, there are an estimated one million Vietnamese suffering from cancers or birth deformities, allegedly as a result of exposure to Agent Orange/dioxin, as well as other U.S. defoliants and chemicals.

Three decades after the Vietnam War ended, scientists from the United States and Vietnam gathered at Yale to share information about the continuing ecological and health effects from herbicides used by American forces during the conflict. Titled “Yale Vietnam Conference 2002: The Ecological and Health Effects of the Vietnam War,” the three day event took place at Yale in September 2002. It was the first conference of its kind to be held on American soil and was a significant step forward in addressing the needs of war veterans both in the United States and Vietnam. YSN sponsored the event in association with the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) and the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, with a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Science.

In her welcoming address to scholars, students, health care professionals, war veterans and public officials from over a dozen countries, Dean Catherine Gilliss explained that the sponsorship of the Yale Vietnam Conference furthers YSN’s mission to improve the health of all people. “As nurses, we have a special interest in seeing that veterans and their families have their health concerns addressed,” said Dean Gilliss. “By bringing the international scientific community together at Yale, we are advancing the science that will help improve the health of the people of Vietnam and the health of the veterans who served there.”

Dr. Schwartz, who was the conference coordinator, has had a long history of research and advocacy that has had an impact on national policy affecting the health of Vietnam War veterans. For the past 12 years she has served as consultant to the U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs, advising the Secretary on the results of Agent Orange-related research, and regulatory, administrative and legislative initiatives. She has also served as Chairperson of the Health Committee at VVA, and has presented testimony on the health and welfare concerns of veterans, especially women veterans, to both Houses of Congress, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Academy of Science. “The YSN community has always been supportive of my work,” says Dr. Schwartz. “When I first approached Dean Gilliss with my findings, she encouraged me to continue pursuing answers to questions that still plague my friends and fellow veterans.” In 2000, Dr. Schwartz led YSN’s effort to become the first private institution to gain access to the U.S. Air Force’s Ranch Hand data. The Ranch Hand study examined the health of children fathered by “Ranch Handers,” men who between 1962 and 1971 sprayed approximately 11 million gallons of Agent Orange in Vietnam.

While the main focus of the conference was on Agent Orange, the participants looked at the entire range of toxic legacies of the Vietnam War, including the long-term health consequences of chronic stress among veterans, and the problems of cancer, HIV, hepatitis C and auto-immune diseases associated with exposure to chemicals in Vietnam. The conference also set the stage for future U.S.-Vietnam research initiatives. “Scientists from Vietnam and the United States realize that in order to help the people

Top: Dr. Linda Schwartz with Dr. Tuong, Vice Minister of Health of Vietnam; **Bottom:** conference participants from the United States and Vietnam during a lecture on the long term health consequences of exposure to Agent Orange



Top: Dean Catherine L. Gilliss and Dr. Linda Schwartz with colleagues from Vietnam and Yale at a meeting with Yale University President Richard C. Levin; **Bottom:** YSN Associate Professor Heather Reynolds with Dr. Phi Phi, immunologist from the Medical University of Hanoi



of Vietnam and the veterans who served there, collaboration between the two countries must continue,” said Do Van Minh, first secretary of the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C. “Veterans and scientists have an important role in bringing our two countries together.”

Participants also noted that the problems resulting from the Vietnam conflict have particular resonance today. Some 200,000 of the 690,000 Gulf War veterans are reportedly suffering from a variety of illnesses, including cancer, heart, and neurological diseases. Studies suggest that the symptoms from those illnesses are consistent with exposures to nerve gases, pesticides, fumes from oil well fires, and dust from explosions of depleted uranium ammunition that service members encountered during the Gulf War.

“The timing of this conference is particularly important as we stand on the precipice of a new war with Iraq,” said Steve Robinson, a 20-year U.S. Army veteran who served in the U.S. Special Forces, and who now heads the National Gulf War Resource Center, a veterans’ advocacy group. “Veterans of the war in Vietnam are still trying to understand the impact of the war almost 30 years later. This demonstrates that no war should be entered into lightly.”

A large number of students from Yale and other universities, with disciplines ranging from nursing, public health, and environmental science to management and law participated in the Yale Vietnam Conference. “I was especially glad to see such a broad spectrum of students share in the discussions,” said Dean Gilliss. “It is particularly important to impress upon the younger scholars how significantly these issues continue to impact people’s lives.”

Dr. Linda Schwartz added, “The Yale Vietnam Conference has helped to inform a new generation of scholars about the need to address the unsolved questions that linger from a war now three decades in the past.”