



Federal Health Matters

Anthrax Vaccine Program Resumed

On January 8, U.S. District Judge Emmet G. Sullivan lifted a preliminary injunction he had issued on December 22 against the DoD's Anthrax Vaccine Immunization Program. In doing so, he allowed the Pentagon to resume its mandatory anthrax inoculation of U.S. service personnel—except in the case of the six challenging the legality of the vaccination program in court.

According to the *Washington Post*, Sullivan's initial ruling was based on the premise that the anthrax vaccine was being used for purposes not approved by the FDA. The six plaintiffs who brought the legal challenge had claimed that FDA approval of the vaccine formally authorized its use for protection against anthrax infection through the skin only—not for protection against airborne spores. On December 30, however, the FDA issued a statement declaring that the vaccine “is safe and effective for the prevention of anthrax disease—regardless of the route of exposure.” In response, Sullivan lifted the injunction.

Speaking on behalf of the six plaintiffs, attorney Mark S. Zaid expressed the additional concerns that FDA approval is based solely on animal research and that the DoD doesn't adhere to the FDA-approved administration schedule,

which calls for six injections to be given over an 18-month period. The DoD, says Zaid, often administers only two or three shots altogether.

DoD Responds to Rise in Soldier Suicides

To date, 300 to 400 service members have been evacuated out of Iraq for mental stress, and at least 21 service members stationed there have committed suicide, up from 13 three months ago. The suicides represent 14% of non-hostile deaths since the Iraqi war started in March 2003.

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The army accounts for 18 of the 21 suicides; the navy and marine corps, three. The army has seen its annual suicide rate rise from 11 per 100,000 during peacetime to a current 13.5 per 100,000.

According to *Stars and Stripes*, the army has studied this issue and now is strengthening the presence of mental health experts in Iraq. They have stationed nine combat

stress teams around the country to provide counseling and medication to service members. Additionally, the army has shored up support for redeploying soldiers by providing counseling for families on the warning signs of depression and suicide, increasing the counseling received by returning troops, and maintaining a toll free hotline for use by soldiers, family, or friends reporting problems.

VA Cuts Wait Time for Vets with Service-Connected Illnesses

A new VA directive gives health care priority to veterans with service-connected medical problems—regardless of the extent of their injury. The new rule extends the benefits that severely disabled veterans were granted in October 2002. It allows veterans who require care for a service-connected disability to receive a primary care evaluation within 30 days of their request. If a VA facility is unable to schedule an appointment within that period of time, it must make arrangements for the patient to be seen at another VA facility or at a contracted facility.

The directive covers both hospitalization and outpatient care. Emergency care will be available for veterans requiring immediate attention. ●