**Diabetic veterans to get cash**

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VA to pay compensation for Agent Orange use in Vietnam War
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Two years ago, Dave Polcyn was talking with a fellow veteran at a reunion when it came out that both had served in the same river town in Vietnam. A little later, he discovered another similarity. They are both diabetic.

At the time, Polcyn, a 54-year-old Medina resident who is a photo editor at the Mansfield News Journal, thought it was just a coincidence.

Now he knows that probably wasn't the case at all.

Last fall, the Department of Veterans Affairs acknowledged that ``limited/suggestive evidence'' links adult-onset (Type II) diabetes and Agent Orange, an herbicide used extensively by the U.S. military in the Vietnam War.

As a result, Polcyn and thousands of other Vietnam veterans with diabetes soon will be eligible for monthly compensation from the VA. Those eligible are honorably discharged veterans with diabetes who served in Vietnam between Jan. 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975. Also included are veterans who served offshore and whose assignment required them to visit Vietnam.

Terry Jemison, a VA spokesman in Washington, D.C., says the government expects to pay $62 million in diabetes compensation over five years. It expects about 13,360 claims to be filed this year and 220,000 within five years. Although the monthly payments aren't expected to begin until later this spring, the VA is urging those eligible to apply now.

Exposure to Agent Orange, which was sprayed from the air to destroy foliage in Vietnam, had previously been linked to a variety of medical problems, including birth defects in veterans' offspring and various cancers.

Type II diabetes, also known as diabetes mellitus, is characterized by high blood-sugar levels caused by the body's inability to process the hormone insulin. More than 90 percent of the nation's 16 million diabetics have Type II, which occurs primarily in adults.

The VA estimates that 2.3 million of the 2.6 million Americans who served in Vietnam or offshore are alive, and about 9 percent of them are diabetic. Six percent of Americans have diabetes.

The amount of compensation awarded will be determined by the severity of a veteran's disease. For 2001, the monthly payments will range from $101 to $2,107. The average will be $462, according to the VA.

Polcyn, who did two tours of duty in Vietnam in his eight years with the Navy, was diagnosed with diabetes in 1997 and has been on medication since. He is a little overweight but has no family history of the disease. Obesity and a genetic predisposition are two of the risk factors associated with Type II diabetes.

Although Polcyn's disease is under control, the thought gives him little comfort. ``When you get diabetes, that's it,'' he says. ``You're gonna die from diabetes. Eventually, I'll have complications.''

And the complications from diabetes can be grim. The disease is the nation's sixth leading cause of death and the leading cause of blindness in adults, says Dr. Phil Kennedy, a family practice physician in Streetsboro, who is himself diabetic.

Also, 80 percent of diabetics die of heart attacks, Kennedy says. The disease can cause kidney failure and is the leading reason for amputation, because of infections caused by poor circulation.

A study released last year by the Air Force of pilots who had flown Agent Orange missions in the war alerted researchers to a possible correlation between the herbicide and diabetes. Another study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health yielded similar results.

Jemison says the studies found that hereditary factors, excess weight and an inactive lifestyle posed a greater diabetes risk than exposure to Agent Orange. However, the VA agreed to ``resolve the reasonable doubt in (the veterans') favor.''

George Baker, assistant executive director of Summit County's Veterans Service Commission, says he has been encouraging eligible veterans to contact the VA about their claim. ``If you're using the VA's doctors (rather than a private doctor), you're establishing a lot more credence,'' Baker says. ``You need to be plugged into the system.''

Baker estimates that Summit County has 58,000 to 62,000 veterans, but he doesn't know how many the new regulations affect.

He says the Vietnam veterans with whom he has spoken are excited about the VA's acknowledgment. Many of them had made the connection between diabetes and Agent Orange themselves, he says.

But ask Dave Polcyn about his reaction, and there is a long, pained silence. When he trusts himself to speak, his voice cracks with emotion.

While in Vietnam, he was unaware of Agent Orange, he says. He recalls jumping into the rivers there without a second thought. ``Sometimes I think I did my duty to my country, and now it's going to chop 15 to 20 years off my life,'' he says. ``I don't want to feel sorry for myself. But 30 years later it comes back to bite me.''

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Submitted, "Fair Seas with Following Winds" YNCS Don Harribine, USN(Ret)