

May 14, 2003

UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH'S INFORMATION LETTER

CHRONIC LYMPHOCYTIC LEUKEMIA (CLL) AND AGENT ORANGE

1. Background

a. Recently the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) released its report "Veterans and Agent Orange: Update 2002." The report concluded that there was "sufficient evidence of an association" between herbicides used in Vietnam and chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL). This is the highest category of association that the IOM-NAS has used in its Agent Orange reports.

b. This represents a category change for CLL from the previous report "Veterans and Agent Orange: Update 2000" in which the IOM committee had included CLL with other forms of leukemia and concluded that there was "inadequate and/or insufficient evidence" to determine whether or not an association with herbicides exists.

c. For the 2002 report, the IOM performed a separate analysis of CLL at the request of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) since the Revised European American Classification of Lymphoid Neoplasms (REAL) system and many textbooks now group CLL with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL) because the malignant proliferation in CLL is believed to originate from lymphoid family cells. VA previously has recognized NHL as being associated with herbicide exposure.

d. VA has initiated regulatory actions to add CLL to the list of conditions presumed to be service-connected based on herbicide exposure.

e. The 2002 IOM report continues to classify leukemias other than CLL in the "inadequate and/or insufficient evidence" category.

f. CLL is a disease primarily of persons age 50 and older. While many patients with CLL have relatively benign courses, others may have progressive disease with short survival and predicting the clinical course may be difficult.

2. Recommendations

a. Veterans being treated for CLL at VA facilities need to be referred for subspecialty consultation or management as appropriate.

b. VA staff need to be aware that Vietnam veterans have special eligibility (Enrollment Priority Category 6) and are exempt from co-payments (including for medications) for treatment of disorders associated with exposure to herbicides. This includes conditions that the IOM/NAS categorized as having "sufficient evidence of an association," "limited and/or suggestive evidence of an association", and "inadequate and/or insufficient evidence of an association" (but does not include conditions for which the IOM-NAS found "limited suggestive evidence of no association" (stomach cancer, pancreatic cancer, colon cancer, rectal cancer and brain tumors)).

May 14, 2003

c. Vietnam veterans or veterans who were exposed to herbicides elsewhere during military service and who have been diagnosed as having CLL, need be advised to consider filing a claim for compensation if they have not already done so. They may contact the VA Regional Office serving their area by calling toll-free 1-800-827-1000. In addition, Veterans Benefits Administration staff members are available at many VA health care facilities to assist veterans with claims.

3. References

a. IOM-NAS report "Veterans and Agent Orange: Update 2002" available on the web at the following address: www.nas.edu.

b. Bast et al., Holland-Frei, Cancer Medicine 2000, 5th edition, pages 1989-2001 and 2035.

c. DeVita et al., Cancer Principles and Practice of Oncology, 6th edition, 2001, pages 2276-2277 and 2447.

d. VA Health Care Enrollment Priority Groups Health Care Fact Sheet.

4. **Additional Information.** For questions or additional information concerning Vietnam veterans and Agent Orange, contact the Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards at 202-273-8575.

Robert H. Roswell, M.D.
Under Secretary for Health

DISTRIBUTION: CO: E-mailed - 5/20/2003
FLD: VISN, MA, DO, OC, OCRO, and 200 – E-mailed 5/20/2003