

The Agent Orange Study Methodology

Introduction

I began researching Agent Orange and other matters relating to New Zealand's Vietnam veterans early in 2016 in preparation for a Waitangi Tribunal hearing in July 2016. A Brief of Evidence was produced and submitted to that hearing. I was advised that I would be required to appear again at the "technical" hearings and to be cross-examined on my evidence.

It became obvious to me that I had barely scratched the surface of the Agent Orange issue, and that although much of the Brief remained valid, part of it needed to be further researched before the next hearings. I embarked on a self-funded research project to fill the gaps in my own understanding, in preparation for my next appearance.

Prompted by a few Vietnam veterans supporting my research I then decided to channel the ongoing research into a book on the post-Vietnam experience of New Zealand's Vietnam veterans, as well as into a new Brief of Evidence for the Waitangi Tribunal. As I gradually produced papers on Agent Orange, I adapted several of them to an audience of Vietnam veterans and their whanau, and published them in the two Facebook groups that I administer, "*NZ Vietnam Veterans*" (437 members @ 8 April 2009) and "*NZ Vietnam Veterans & Families*" (1,210 members @ 8 April 2019).

There was mostly a deafening silence, but with some public and private support. For a week or two I did attract virulent opposition and ad hominem attack from the whanau of a veteran who had given evidence themselves. That soon died down. The previously frequent promotion of the Agent Orange narrative in those groups has mostly disappeared.

The research for the book is incomplete and ongoing. The present Brief of Evidence is based around the previously published papers.

Exploring the Idea of Agent Orange

My own worldview, influencing the analysis, is essentially modernist and strongly influenced by Enlightenment values and ideas. It is liberal and accepting of the scientific metanarrative, although iconoclastic and intellectually sceptical.

A developing theme, shaping the direction of some of the research, arises from my personal longstanding interest in and study of the history and evolution of ideas, and the spread and adoption of ideas. Epistemology. How and where did the idea of Agent Orange arise? Who originated it? Who brought it to New Zealand and propagated it? When? What were their motivations and beliefs? How many Vietnam veterans and their families adopted the Agent Orange narrative? Why? What were the background

influences to the adoption of the Agent Orange narrative? The historical, social, economic, legal and other contexts?

Methodology

Almost everyone, be they Vietnam veteran, his family, environmentalist, politician, bureaucrat, journalist or even scientist, comes to the topic of Agent Orange with a set of pre-conceived ideas. As I did. At one time, not having paid much attention to the long running Agent Orange campaign, I simply accepted it.

But once one seriously delves into the objective study of Agent Orange, as objective as one can be, one finds oneself standing behind a veil of confusion and ignorance, for there is much more to the topic than previously imagined.

“It is very difficult to find a black cat in a dark room,” warns an old proverb. “Especially when there is no cat.”¹

Or to find an orange cat in an orange room. Cat or no cat, I soon realised that it would not be an easy search. Setting aside the pre-conceptions, acknowledging the ignorance, and proceeding from there into and through the confusion is the only way to go. Starting from a presumption of ignorance is after all the scientific method.

As I gradually read myself into the subject, it became obvious that it was an enormously complex and daunting inter-disciplinary project encompassing history, the military, science, medicine, law, politics, economics, culture, sociology, epistemology and psychology; to begin with. In none of the literature I accessed was a complete inter-disciplinary view attained.

I have advanced qualifications in only one of those disciplines. However I was confident I could master the science, perhaps the most difficult of them, based on both a broad and a detailed understanding developed through forty years interest and reading in science. As I observe in another paper, critical thinking or inductive reasoning, the basis of the scientific method and process, can be taught to almost anyone who wants to think scientifically and to understand science.

It is however not a widespread skill. There is therefore scant scientific literacy within the general society, and that deficiency has been reflected in the Agent Orange debate for four decades.

Information gleaned from those multiple disciplines comprised threads that needed to be drawn together into a coherent whole. I decided therefore to read my way into all of them and to construct a single chronology or timeline of information and evidence from all of the threads. The timeline alone eventually expanded to some three hundred pages.

¹ Firestein, Stuart. Ignorance: How It Drives Science (Kindle Locations 63-64). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

During the construction of the timeline the history became clearer, and several background contexts emerged, influencing events and attitudes over the decades since the Vietnam War. The Agent Orange debate has however been conducted within its own narrow context unrelated to trends and developments in the wider society.

Perhaps the most significant context that has been largely ignored in the debate is population health. Beginning in the 1960's at the time we were in Vietnam, there has been a directly influential background development, deeper than the science and politics of the issue, and social and economic change. It has probably had an enormously significant but largely unacknowledged effect on the health of Vietnam veterans and their whanau. It is that the Vietnam veteran cohort and their whanau have been living, suffering and dying through an unprecedented decades long epidemic of the diseases and disorders of affluence affecting the whole of modern society; obesity, diabetes, allergies, immunodeficiency disorders, heart disease, respiratory disease, stroke, cancers, and neurological and psychological disorders. It is too important to be ignored, as it has been.

Originating in the universities, the postmodern intellectual challenge to scientific authority from the 1960's onwards, and gaining traction in the 1980's, has had a marked influence on the debate. The rise of postmodernist thinking was closely linked to the rise of environmentalism. The evolution of environmentalism and environmental protection agencies and their methodology after the publication of Rachel Carson's book "*Silent Spring*" in 1962 was influential in shaping perceptions and beliefs about the presence of chemicals in the environment. Some scientific research and legal cases in the USA and in Australia had a major influence in New Zealand debate, and some that might have did not. Within New Zealand the political context also seemed to have had significant influence on events.

Digital communications from about the time of the 1998 "Parade 98 - Vietnam Remembered" national reunion have had an enormous influence in spreading viral-like ideas and beliefs, and coordinating activism. What had previously been low key activism gained new impetus and a wider audience. Social media today ensures that those same ideas and beliefs, regardless of their veracity, live on in the collective mind.

There were other contextual influences.

And it became obvious that some contextual influence remains unexplored and unexposed. The influence of social, economic and cultural factors on the post-war lives of veterans and their whanau is as yet un-researched. Epidemiology has been one of the main scientific and medical specialties applied to the study of the health of veterans and their whanau. But the newer expertise of social epidemiology and cultural epidemiology, bringing in the approaches of medical sociologists and medical anthropologists, has not been tapped.

From the timeline and identified contexts several themes emerged, and it is those themes that came to form the backbone of the research. The dominant theme running through the whole period is the Agent Orange claim making and campaigning of Vietnam veterans in the USA and Australia, directly influencing ideas and beliefs, claim making and campaigning in New Zealand. Another major theme concerns the different knowledge, understandings and misunderstandings of the various protagonists in the Agent Orange debate.

Most obvious was a lack of veterans' (and journalists') understanding of the scientific method and process, often mistaking correlation for causation, leading to the adoption of clearly unsupportable beliefs about the science.

New Zealand's veterans were also almost universally unaware of the legal concept of presumption, the policy device by which veterans were and are given the benefit of the doubt and could be granted benefits without the need for scientific or medical proof of causation. That lack of knowledge led the veteran community collectively to mistakenly interpret the presumptive acceptance of health conditions in the USA as scientific and legal proof of causation by Agent Orange, and to campaign on the basis of that assumed but mistaken premise.

That theme alone, scientific and legal lack of knowledge, combined with a lack of knowledgeable leadership, explains why veterans and policy makers were talking past each other for decades without ever coming to any mutual understandings.

Closely aligned to that is the process leading to the construction and adoption of individual and group narratives by veterans and by their whanau. I discussed this aspect of memory and narrative in some detail in my 2016 Brief of Evidence.²

And running through all of the commentary and anecdotal accounts, at inquiries and hearings, in the media, in veterans' online fora, and at reunions and other gatherings, in the individual and group narratives, there is a strong theme of anger and grief and fear that I have called *Mamae*. Adopting a long-term perspective it can be seen perhaps as the true legacy of New Zealand's Vietnam War.

The Research Framework

I then reached for two intellectual frameworks to tie together the body of research that emerged, within its contextual boundaries, and based on the emerging themes.

The first is the constructionist social problem theory borrowed from sociology. I have used it to describe and trace the development of the claim making of veterans focused primarily on proving Agent Orange as a major cause of disease, disorder, disability, defect and death, and aimed at policy

² Himona, R., WAI 2500 #A190, Brief of Evidence, "Individual and Group Memory", paras 45-66.

makers in order to obtain resolution and remediation of the perceived problem.

The second is epistemological, tracing the sources and influence of the different understandings of scientists, judges, policy makers and veterans about the various issues, leading to much misunderstanding.

That intellectual framework is described in detail in the body of my evidence.

Future Research

The main area yet to be studied is the New Zealand Government response to veterans' claim making; the other side of the debate. There is very little information publicly available about what government agencies and their ministers discussed and decided, and the reasons for those decisions. That will require a search of government archives across all of the involved agencies, sometime in the future.