

Inside story

Drugged and duped

Eric Gow was told he was helping to find a cure for the common cold. In fact he was being dosed with LSD in chemical warfare trials. Fifty years on, he and other guinea pigs want to know the truth behind the secret experiments. By Rob Evans

Rob Evans

The Guardian, Wednesday 13 March 2002

Eric Gow had a vivid experience when he was aged 19, something that he will never forget. He found that he could not add up three numbers. The radiator in the room started to go in and out "like a squeezebox", shoe-marks on the floor spun around "like a catherine wheel firework". In the evening, he was still tripping - he saw brightly coloured images in the phonebooth as he was calling for a taxi.

Eric was not some hippie in search of a magical higher consciousness. He was a serving member of Britain's armed forces in a top-secret military laboratory, who had been ordered to drink a colourless liquid by scientists. He and other young men were being used as human guinea pigs in highly classified experiments directed, it seems, by Britain's spies.

According to new evidence uncovered by the Guardian, MI5 and MI6 subjected the men to LSD without telling them what they were doing. The men say they were duped - allegations being investigated by police as part of a two-year inquiry into the use of humans in chemical warfare trials.

In the depths of the cold war British intelligence, in collaboration with the CIA, were keen to find out if LSD could be used as a truth drug during interrogations. But even today the guinea pigs are finding it difficult to get the government to admit these psychedelic experiments took place.

Gow, who has been a magistrate for 25 years, is one of the most energetic campaigners for the truth. In 1954 he was a teenage Royal Navy radio-operator who volunteered to take part in what he was told was research to find a cure for the common cold. Instead he ended up at the chemical warfare research establishment at Porton Down, Wiltshire. For over 80 years, Porton has conducted tests on more than 20,000 members of the armed forces, to develop chemical weapons and protection against poison gas. In this most clandestine of establishments, it would be easy for government officials to siphon off some of the men from its pool of human guinea pigs and lend them to MI5 and MI6 for their experiments.

Even now Gow is angry that the scientists tested their drugs on young servicemen with little regard for their safety. "To use your own as guinea pigs and put them in any harm's way at all is not really on, is it?"

Another 19-year-old, airman Don Webb, says he was told in 1953 that he was taking part in common cold research, believing it was a "cushy number" and "a week's pay for

nothing". Instead, he was given LSD several times over a week in what he says was a nightmarish, horrific experience. Scientists told him to "take this and tell us what happens. I hallucinated for a hell of a long time." He remembers "walls melting, cracks appearing in people's faces, you could see their skulls, eyes would run down cheeks, Salvador Dali-type faces, all in broad daylight. A flower would turn into a slug. You could see things growing on you."

Webb has grown angry as he has grown older. He suffered flashbacks for 10 years, but was not monitored by government officials in any way. He says it was "absolutely reckless and quite cavalier" to administer hallucinogens to servicemen who didn't know what was happening to them.

The impetus for the experiments appears to have come from a paranoid CIA which feared the Russians had a wonder drug that could turn people into robotic super-soldiers. The Americans responded in 1950 by launching a huge and now infamous research programme into ways of controlling human behaviour. They were especially interested in LSD and were alarmed by reports that the Russians were attempting to buy up all the LSD in the world. In a desperate response, the CIA covertly funded experiments on people, without their knowledge, at universities and research institutions, even prisons.

CIA documents show that in 1951, British intelligence officials agreed to co-operate with the agency in its research. Many details of the CIA experiments were exposed in the 1970s, but the British end of this cooperation remained hidden, thanks to the culture of secrecy in this country. The British government admits that 136 servicemen were tested with LSD at Porton between 1961 and 1968, for a military programme that had nothing to do with the intelligence services. But it has until recently refused to admit there were any LSD tests on humans before that.

The clearest evidence comes from Peter Wright, the MI5 officer who won a battle against the Thatcher government to publish his memoirs, *Spycatcher*. Wright, also a scientist for MI5, revealed: "The whole area of chemical research was an active field in the 1950s. I was co-operating with MI6 in a joint programme to investigate how far the hallucinatory drug LSD could be used in interrogations, and extensive trials took place at Porton. I even volunteered as a guinea pig on one occasion."

Buried deep in declassified official papers are fragments which corroborate Wright's statement. One document shows that in 1964, senior army officers struggling to suppress rebellions in Britain's colonies wanted to know if there were any truth drugs they could use on captured insurgents. A Whitehall mandarin scribbled that Porton had investigated this in the past, adding: "Position v. doubtful - not a worthwhile project. MI5 are in possession of facts."

Another document reveals that in 1965, Dr Bill Ladell, then in charge of human experiments at Porton, had commented that "previous trials on LSD had been carried out at Porton many years before, but these had been tentative and inadequately controlled". And Ladell would know - he "handled all MI5 and MI6 work" at Porton, according to Wright.

The government insists it cannot discuss any aspect of MI5 and MI6 operations, even those 50 years ago. So many questions about LSD research remain unanswered: how long did the experiments go on for? How many human guinea pigs were used? What doses were given? And what were the results of the trials?

Some ground was conceded by the government in January, after Wiltshire detectives dug up new information. Junior defence minister Lewis Moonie was compelled to admit to Gow that "there was, in fact, research being carried out at Porton Down involving LSD, as early as 1953". But he added that although Gow's experience "bears all the

hallmarks of an LSD trial", there were no surviving documents proving that he had actually been given LSD.

In the US, the CIA's quest to control human behaviour came to nothing, but there was a price for this failure. Congressional inquiries revealed that the CIA had grossly violated the rights of the unwitting human guinea pigs. The chances of the British government ever coming clean about their experiments seem slim.

© 2012 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.

;