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MoD reveals 4,000 in nerve gas tests

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Up to 4,000 servicemen have been subjected to nerve agent experiments at the chemical and biological warfare establishment at Porton Down, Ministry of Defence officials disclosed yesterday.

The figures - a third more than previously released - relate to servicemen who are among more than 20,000 human guinea pigs to be offered new medical assessments. The move follows an increasing number of complaints by volunteers that their health problems were caused by the experiments, which also involved mustard gas and LSD.

Of all the substances tested on humans at Porton, in Wiltshire, where chemical and biological warfare experiments have taken place since 1916 and are continuing today, the nerve agents are potentially the most dangerous.

An inquiry by the Wiltshire police force is looking at the way the tests were conducted, and at allegations including those saying that elderly people suffered dementia after germ warfare experiments.

Lewis Moonie, the junior defence minister, told the Commons this week that he took "seriously" volunteers' claims that their ill health was a result of their participation in the trials. The MoD said it would seek independent advice for an epidemiological study although it had seen "no scientific evidence to support the belief".

Yesterday, MoD officials reiterated that they had seen no scientific or medical evidence linking the health problems of veterans to their participation in nuclear tests or the Gulf war.

Alan Care, the lawyer for the Porton volunteers, said the MoD's new assessment programme was insufficient. "We will still demand a full independent inquiry," he said.

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