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# Chemical warfare trials short of volunteers

Poor rewards and overstretched units mean forces personnel are slow to respond to appeals for 'guinea pigs' from Porton Down scientists

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Military scientists have had difficulty in recruiting enough human "guinea pigs" for their chemical warfare experiments in recent years, internal documents from the ministry of defence reveal.

The shortage has slowed the rate of experiments at the secretive Porton Down chemical defence establishment in Wiltshire, a source said.

An official history of the human trials, obtained by the Guardian, catalogues how Porton Down frequently struggled to attract enough volunteers for its experiments between the 1920s and the 1960s.

Its recruitment practices during the cold war are being investigated by Wiltshire police after human guinea pigs complained that they were tricked into taking part in poison gas experiments.

The guinea pigs claim that they had volunteered for research to find a cure for the common cold but ended up in Porton Down's gas chambers.

Wiltshire detectives are also examining the death of Ronald Maddison, 20, an airman who had nerve gas dripped on to his arm in a 1953 trial.

Porton Down is believed to have conducted the longest running programme of chemical warfare experiments on humans in the world. At least 20,000 volunteers have taken part in the past 80 years, although even this number has not been enough to satisfy the scientists' demands.

The volunteers, recruited from military units, often spend around two weeks at Porton Down.

Recent recruitment figures are in annual reports of the establishment's independent ethics committee, which monitors the tests, and have been released to the Liberal Democrats' economy spokesman, Matthew Taylor.

The latest figures show that 72 volunteers took part in the experiments in 1998, two thirds of the overall number requested.

In 1996 50 volunteers were recruited, just under half of the total wanted. In other years since 1994, between 71% and 77% of the number requested took part in tests.

Mr Taylor said yesterday: "Given Porton Down's record, no wonder it's having problems getting volunteers for its experiments.

"Many volunteers from the past are complaining that their health has been damaged by tests at Porton Down. The government has failed to investigate their health problems properly.

"This does not inspire confidence among service men and women to make themselves available for the tests."

The shortage of volunteers has not prevented tests from being completed.

A source close to Porton Down suggested that military personnel were reluctant to volunteer because they were worried about what the scientists would do to them; the financial inducements were poor and their commanding officers were unwilling to let them leave their units.

A spokeswoman said Britain's military commitments abroad, for example in the former Yugoslavia, prevented some personnel from volunteering. "It may not be easy for military units to release service personnel to go to Porton for two week periods." Recruitment had improved in recent months, but figures could not be released.

Compared with the cold war period, Porton Down's programme of experiments has been much scaled down, typically using fewer than 100 volunteers a year.

The volunteers mainly test equipment which protects individuals from chemical and biological weapons. They are also given anti-gas drugs to see if they have any unpleasant side effects. Volunteers have not been exposed to poison gases since 1989.

The official history of the trials - unearthed in the public records office - charts Porton Down's woes in recruiting volunteers.

In 1927 the scientists complained that the flow of subjects for their experiments was "insufficient". In 1937 they were again grumbling about the "irregular supply".

In the late 1940s they lamented that "each year saw the perennial crisis with regard to supply".

By the 1960s the response to appeals for volunteers remained "poor".

It was suggested that the decline in numbers "was closely linked" to the end of national service, which had provided 30% of the human guinea pigs.

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