

Hansard (Wesminster Hall) 22 Feb 2005 : Column 32WH

Porton Down

2 pm

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Edward O'Hara): Hon. Members will be aware that this is a highly charged issue. I understand that certain legal proceedings are in play, and I ask hon. Members to be sensitive to that fact when making their contributions.

The Minister advises me that, given the importance of the issue, he needs a full 15 minutes in which to reply, so I shall take account of that in determining the time at which I call the Front-Bench contributions.

Mr. Patrick Hall (Bedford) (Lab): I am pleased to have secured the opportunity to raise several issues arising from the service volunteer programme at Porton Down, particularly about what happened there in the 1950s. In doing so, I am relieved to have a little more time than the three minutes that I managed to squeeze into the short debate on 10 January, which was secured by the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms), who brought to the attention of the House matters relating to his constituent Mr. Douglas Shave, who was a Porton Down service volunteer.

I am pleased to see the hon. Gentleman in his place today, and my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), who served this country as a Royal Armoured Corps national serviceman between 1950 and 1952—a time that is highly relevant to the matters I shall raise today. I look forward to hearing his contribution. I am also pleased to see present the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), the hon. Members for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) and for Southport (Dr. Pugh), and others. I look forward to hearing their contributions.

As I said on 10 January, I come to this issue through a constituent of mine, Mr. Peter Parker. He joined the RAF and national service, and served as an aircraftman between 1951 and August 1953. He recalls hearing an officer announce that volunteers were required to attend the Chemical Defence Experimental Establishment at Porton Down. He recalls that the advice he received thereafter and some written

information relating to it was clear that the process he faced as a volunteer posed no risk to his health. He recalls being told, and certainly believing, that he was participating in a programme of research into the common cold.

Mr. Parker was assisted in his decision to volunteer by an offer of a 48-hour pass and 15 shillings. He attended a gas chamber on 4 May 1953, where 200 mg of the nerve agent sarin GB was applied to a piece of cloth on his forearm. Sarin was then known to be the most toxic of the poisons brought to the UK from Nazi Germany. It gave him a terrible headache for many hours, from which he thankfully recovered. He did not know that a potentially lethal nerve agent had been applied to him. Neither could he have known that two days later, at the same place, service volunteer aircraftman Ronald Maddison would die as a result of a similar process. Mr. Parker did not know any of those things until approximately three years ago, when he received a telephone call from Wiltshire police under Operation Antler.

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Thanks to my constituent, I have made contact with other people who are concerned about those issues. I mention in particular Mr. Ken Earl, who is a leading light in the Porton Down Veterans Support Group, which consists of over 550 veterans, Mr. Alan Care of Thomson Snell and Passmore, who represents my constituent, and Llias Craik—Ronald Maddison's sister.

I thank Peter Parker, Ken Earl and Alan Care for their assistance, courtesy and good humour. They, and others, have helped me to understand the wider picture, which is that well over 20,000 people have participated in the service volunteer programme in the 80 years following the first world war, and that much of the work, such as assisting in the development of protective clothing, was, and is, uncontroversial. Indeed, although the scale of the programme is much reduced, I note that it continues to this day.

Many of the participants who are still alive have no issues about their experiences as volunteers. Between the 1950s and 1980s, however, some of the activities at Porton Down included studying

the effects of nerve agents on human subjects. The veterans support group believes that many people who were volunteers in the 1950s later suffered unusual patterns of health problems and early death. To be fair, the Ministry of Defence has taken those suggestions seriously since the police investigation began in 1999. It has been open to making available to former volunteers information about what was done to them, including the opportunity to examine the records for themselves.

In May 2001, the Government announced that the MOD would carry out a comprehensive historical survey, supervised by Professor Ian Kennedy of the Porton Down service volunteer programme. Professor Kennedy is acknowledged as one of the country's foremost medical ethics experts, among other things. I note from a letter dated 7 August 2001 to me from the Minister of State, Ministry of Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride (Mr. Ingram), the Minister who was responsible for such matters at the time, that the survey would be published. The Government went on to fund an independent epidemiological study, led by researchers from Oxford university and overseen by the Medical Research Council. I understand that it is due to be completed next year, and I trust that it will be published. If claims are to be made on the basis of the outcome, I believe that the War Pensions Agency is the correct body to deal with them.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Ivor Caplin): My hon. Friend mentioned two ongoing studies, and it may be helpful if I talk briefly about the historical study to which he referred that was commissioned in 2001. That work is now complete and is being proof-read, so we can publish the research as soon as it is practicable to do so. I anticipate that it will be published within the next three or so months.

Mr. Hall: That is most helpful, and answers a question that I wanted to ask at the end of my contribution. I shall refer to it again later for the sake of completeness.

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Several people, including the veterans support group, have called for a public inquiry principally into the health issues, but I do not believe that such an inquiry is justified if the epidemiological study is sufficiently broad. It is, however, important that the study into the possible long-term effects of exposure to a nerve agent does not confine itself to the incidence of cancer, but includes mental illnesses.

My key concern is the quality of the consent that the volunteers gave before participating in the

trials at Porton Down. For such consent to be wholesome and meaningful, it must surely be informed. I believe that there is *prima facie* evidence to suggest that it was anything but informed. My constituent, Peter Parker, believes that he was deceived, that he was not told the truth, and that he was not provided with the information necessary for him to give informed consent. His belief is shared by hundreds of other former volunteers.

My hon. Friend the Minister has dismissed several times the widespread claims that volunteers were recruited on the pretext of common cold research, citing the fact that the Chemical Defence Experimental Establishment at Porton Down never carried out work on the common cold and that that work was actually done at the Medical Research Council unit at Harnham Down near Salisbury, which closed in 1989. I accept all that, although that does not prove that people were not misled into thinking that they were assisting common cold research when they volunteered.

My hon. Friend has also stated that after Operation Antler, the recent five-year investigation into the Porton Down volunteer programme, Wiltshire police found no documentary evidence of a centrally organised campaign to recruit volunteers on the basis of common cold research. He has said that the Wiltshire and Swindon coroner at the recent rerun inquest into the death of Ronald Maddison confirmed that. However, although documentary evidence may not exist—or has not, at least, been found—the words of those who were there at the time and who bore witness to these events surely counts as evidence. One way or another, they picked up this message from their military units around the country, and it simply will not do to gainsay that.

I do not dispute the outcome of the police investigation or the coroner's statement, but the inquest, which sat for 64 days last year and considered hundreds of pages of documents, revealed important facts about the recruitment information made available to potential service volunteers. As I mentioned, Porton Down has been in use for military research purposes since the first world war, and I believe that it opened in 1916. The inquest turned up a letter dated 30 July 1925 from the War Office, which referred to the need for volunteers to take part in studies of the treatment of men who had been contaminated with mustard gas. It states:

“The tests will involve only slight discomfort to the individual, and consist simply in subjecting a small place on the arm to the action of certain chemicals. They will be carried out under expert medical supervision of the staff of the

Physiological Department, Porton, and under such conditions that the risk of injury to the individual is negligible.”

By 1953, the wording had become even more reassuring. In February 1953, a notice calling for volunteers at an RAF unit said:

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“The physical discomfort resulting from tests is usually very slight. Tests are carefully planned to avoid the slightest chance of danger.”

After the death of Ronald Maddison on 6 May that year, a Treasury solicitor, in a memo marked “Secret” and dated 15 May 1953, stated:

“I suggest that the wording of the information to be brought to the attention of personnel to encourage them to volunteer ought to be altered. The sentence ‘Tests are carefully planned to avoid the slightest chance of danger’ has proved misleading. Indeed it is difficult to see how it was ever possible to say truthfully that tests with lethal gases did not contain ‘the slightest chance of danger’.”

As a result of his advice, Ministry notice board information calling for volunteers was altered to state:

“The tests carried out at CDEE are carefully planned and are arranged so as to eliminate all foreseeable danger.”

In 1964, after a note from Porton Down referred to that wording as “unfortunate” because it probably deterred some potential volunteers, the official wording was altered again to remove the word “foreseeable”. In other words, it reverted to the pre-Maddison wording, if I can put it like that, and said that there was no danger.

Even if there is no documentary evidence of volunteers being recruited on the basis of common cold research, the written evidence that does exist is far more damning. It claims variously that there was not “the slightest chance of danger”, that there was no “foreseeable danger” and then simply that there was no danger. At the very least, we have a *prima facie* case of volunteers not being told the truth—of their being lied to about the danger that at least some of them faced at Porton Down. That strongly suggests that they were not in a position to give informed consent.

The Adjournment debate of 16 October 1996 was secured by the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East in order to raise issues relating to a constituent, Mr. Michael Paynter, one of the service volunteers at Porton in 1954 and again in 1955. Replying to that debate, the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), then Minister of State for the Armed Forces, emphasised that over the past 80 years, experiments on humans at Porton

Down had always followed best practice. Furthermore, he stated that since the inception of the 1947 Nuremburg code of ethics on medical research, which resulted from the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, the principles laid out in the code have governed all work relating to human subjects at Porton Down. He went on:

“The code emphasises the essential voluntary nature of the consent to participate and states that volunteers must be made aware of the nature of the study, its duration, its purpose, the method and means by which it is to be carried out, all inconvenience and hazards that can reasonably be expected and any likely effects on their health that are known to those proposing the study.”

[Official Report, 16 October 1996; Vol. 282, c. 790.]

That does not accurately describe the circumstances that were experienced by my constituent and many others.

At the inquest last year, many ex-servicemen gave evidence that they believed that they had attended Porton Down for research into the common cold. They certainly believed that nothing would be done that put them in danger. They also explained that the dominant

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culture of the time was to do as one was told and not to question authority—a culture that may not square with the more modern concept of informed consent. Indeed, some will doubtless question the status of that concept in the United Kingdom, and point out that the Nuremburg code has not been incorporated into domestic law. But is anyone saying that a person about to be exposed to a nerve agent voluntarily should not be fully apprised of what a nerve agent is, what it is designed to do, and therefore the risks that may be faced? Put like that, of course, one may conclude that few if any would consent. That is the point, is it not?

Taken together, I do not believe that much credence can be attributed to the official position of the Ministry of Defence on the matter. I do not believe that the consent granted by a large number of volunteers can fairly be described as informed. I do not accept that best practice has been followed for many years. I do not believe that the principles of the Nuremburg code have been applied since 1947.

I think that a sufficiently robust case has been made and that the Government would wish to set the record straight by setting up an independent public and judicial inquiry. Surely that is the least that those who served their country deserve. Why not? Those matters occurred in the main 50 or so

years ago. They are not the outcome of current Government policy. It would be the right thing to do.

It is important to acknowledge that the present Government have been co-operative and helpful in a number of ways. The understandable desire by service volunteers for information about what happened to them at Porton Down has been met much greater openness than that encountered in 1996 by the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East. The volunteers' concerns about possible unusual health and mortality effects have been taken seriously, and studies continue. After the then chief constable of Wiltshire, Elizabeth Neville now Dame Elizabeth Neville—took the enlightened and courageous decision to launch Operation Antler, the then Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), agreed to contribute £870,000 towards costs of about £2.4 million.

Sadly, there are mixed messages from Government. It has taken them 51 years to apologise for the death of Ronald George Maddison, and to indicate that they would pay compensation to his family—even though the Treasury solicitor recommended the latter in 1953. At the same time, they appear to be going in the opposite direction because of the MOD's decision to challenge the inquest's unanimous verdict of unlawful killing by way of judicial review.

I conclude by asking my hon. Friend the Minister the following questions. Will he outline the nature of the epidemiological study to which I referred and specifically confirm whether it includes mental health? Will he explain why the 2001 comprehensive historical survey of the Porton Down service volunteer programme has not yet been published? He has stated that it will happen in the next three months. Does he agree that it is highly unlikely that a significant number of service volunteers were in a position to give informed consent before they participated in trials at Porton Down during the 1950s? Does he agree with his predecessor that the principles of the Nuremberg code

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applied to the service volunteer programme since the inception of the code in 1947? If so, does he believe that those principles were properly implemented throughout the 1950s and beyond? Will he explain why the Ministry of Defence is prepared to spend possibly large sums of public money by challenging by way of judicial review the process and outcome of the recent inquest? Does he agree that an independent public and judicial inquiry into the service volunteer programme should take place in order to establish

whether volunteers were misled? If not, will he spell out why not?

This year sees the 60th anniversary of Victory in Europe day. It also sees the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps. There will not be another occasion for a major celebration and commemoration of this nature, simply because the generation who carried the torch will no longer be around. It would be fitting for the men and women who served this country at war and in national service that this year at last the full story of Porton Down be told.

Several hon. Members rose

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is worth my reminding hon. Members present about sensitivity to judicial proceedings.

2.22 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): This is an appalling story of an arrogant state and innocent young men; a story of a state that believed it was acceptable to experiment on its own citizens without giving them proper information to enable them to agree to what was going on; and a story of utter innocence and trust. As the hon. Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall), who very ably opened the debate, reminded us, it was an age in which people implicitly trusted authority. That trust was betrayed.

I would like to speak principally on behalf of my constituent Ken Earl, and set out the picture that emerges from what happened to him, initially in his own words. In a letter to me he says:

“When I was called up for my National Service in January 1952, I was a student actor with a repertory company in Folkestone. I was eighteen years old and had been educated at the Harvey Grammar School, also in Folkestone ... I had decided that it was to be an actor's life for me and I was a reluctant conscript when summoned to the RAF. Since the age of fourteen I had been an enthusiastic member of the ... St. John Ambulance ... so after my recruit training, I decided to be a ‘medic’ for two years. Unlike some others, I had not received any gas instruction during training, had not been issued with a gas mask and as a ‘medic’ at an RAF hospital I did not do guard duty. I was eventually stationed at Wroughton RAF Hospital, Swindon, Wiltshire. I enjoyed my job and soon I was flying from RAF Lyneham to the Middle and Far East to pick up wounded and other sick patients. I was happy where I was and I did not have any urge for a change. However, sometime in April 1953, I saw an item of interest on our Hospital notice board ... ‘Volunteers wanted to help find a cure for the common cold. Those

participating will receive extra pay and a weekend pass'. The extra pay and the leave were what made me decide to apply. I was not worried about the cold as I seldom caught one. However, National Servicemen were always hard up, we received far less money than the regular airmen and when I did get a pass, I had to hitchhike all the way home to Maidstone and then do the same for the return. I had a girlfriend in Maidstone, who I eventually married, and I wanted to get home to see her. That in a nutshell is how a young country boy came to go to CDEE, the Chemical Defence Experimental Establishment at

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Porton Down. I hadn't read many newspapers in my life, I had never seen a television programme and like the other lads with me I was extremely naïve. On 2 May 1953 I walked through the gates at Porton where I met nineteen other airmen from different units and all between the ages of 18 and 25. I was a senior aircraftman, I was the heaviest of all the men there, I was extremely fit and well and at that time I played rugby for my station and I was a keen weightlifter. We were all put in one billet, a wooden hut ... May was a Saturday, and is remembered as the day of the Stanley Matthews Cup Final. Nothing happened on the Sunday ... Monday ... we were split mainly into groups of six and taken to a building for what can only be described as anthropometrical tests. This is a comparative study of the sizes and proportions of the human body. Not a medical ... in my job I had helped carry out plenty of medicals. The tests involved taking measurements: height, weight, body shapes, a lung capacity test ... We had a series of rubber patches stuck on one of our upper arms and a blood sample was taken. My group, there were six of us, were then marched to a low brick built building with glass panels to one side. There were two men in charge of the test and they were wearing white coats. They told us to roll up our left battledress sleeve to the elbow, and then they tied two pieces of khaki material, one on top of the other, to the inside of our forearms. We were then issued with respirators and instructed to put them on and told not to remove them until they told us to do so. We entered this building, which I now know to be a gas chamber, and the doors were sealed. The two technicians who I thought at the time were doctors entered with us, they too were wearing respirators. We were seated at a small table in the centre of the chamber and I am now aware that my place in the middle was seat number 4. One of the technicians then

proceeded to drip ... a colourless liquid onto the material on our left forearms. I now know that we each received 20x10 mg drops which I thought at the time and in my ignorance was a cold virus or vaccine but I now know was 200 mg of the lethal nerve agent sarin (GB). Today this chemical is known as a weapon of mass destruction! I had not been told anything and did not give my informed consent to this contamination. Never having worn a respirator before I became very hot and claustrophobic, of course the sarin was playing its part too and the climatic chamber was heated. How I lasted half an hour in this state I will never know and I still cannot travel on the underground to this day without a feeling of panic. After half an hour we were released gasping and spluttering into the open air. It was a beautiful May morning. We had the material taken from our arms, were told to run around a bit and then to remove our respirators. A second blood sample was taken.

*

Two days later on 6 May another six young airmen entered this chamber and sitting in my seat that day was LAC Ronald Maddison. He died an agonising death within 45 minutes of being contaminated.

*

My red blood cholinesterase depression was 34 per cent., Maddison's was 99 per cent. at post mortem.

*

The Porton scientists believed before his death that 100 per cent. depression would be fatal and they had already had cases of over 80 per cent. who had been hospitalised.

*

Oliver Slater, a man in the chamber with me on 4 May, had a 90 per cent. depression and this critical figure was ignored by the scientists. They went ahead two days later and killed Maddison.

*

Only twelve were tested with 200 mg that week, my group and Maddison's group and of those twelve only five of us have reached three score years and ten. The other seven have died prematurely.

*

Only ten days before we arrived at Porton, a young soldier had collapsed in an experiment with 300 mg of sarin, his breathing stopped but he was resuscitated. He was still very ill in the Station Hospital and on the day that Maddison

died, his cholinesterase depression was still 85 per cent.

*

I was not told what the scientists were doing or whether there could be any long-term ill health from this so-called cold test.

*

Before I went to Porton, I had never heard of the place.

*

I did not receive a Medical examination at my parent unit before leaving for ... Porton.

*

I did not receive a Medical on my arrival at Porton.

*

I did not have a medical after leaving Porton Down seven days later on 8th May.

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*

I was not medically examined on my return to my parent unit.

*

Neither my service record or my service medical record shows an entry of my attendance at Porton.

*

I didn't have a medical check or follow up in the years following my contamination, we were just left to our own devices.

*

I didn't find out what had really happened to me at Porton until I read in a newspaper in 1999 about the Police Inquiry ... My health since that time has often been poor unlike the rest of my family. I believe my nervous and immune systems have been damaged. I have suffered urinary tract problems since 1954, the year after the experiment.

*

I suffer from numerous skin problems. I believe these have been brought on by the skin contamination with sarin. These include: Seborrhoeic eczema, Scalp scaling, Nasal rash, Pitted nails, Erythema, Pruritis, Scaly areas on hands, and a Basal Cell Carcinoma on the opposite side of my forearm to the sarin application which has been surgically removed.

*

I have been diagnosed with Ankylosing Spondylitis and as a result, two areas of my spine are seized up.

*

I need to have constant colonoscopies to remove Tubulo-Villous Adenomas. Luckily benign so far but only because these are removed regularly. The problem is ongoing.

*

My right leg is dead to the knee joint and I walk with the aid of a stick.

*

I have calcaneal spurs with associated Plantar Fasciitis, making walking difficult and painful.

*

I have had a major operation for the removal of Prostate Cancer.

*

I have to take Warfarin to thin my blood.

*

I have multiple hepatic cysts."

That is the story of a young man of 18 who was reluctantly conscripted to national service, who began to enjoy the work and who was comprehensively betrayed by his country and by those who ran its armed services and the experimental centre at Porton Down. I am outraged when I am told that there is no documentary evidence that the subjects thought that they were going to get a common cold. If they were not told that they were going to get a common cold, we have to conclude that they are all lying, that they have formed some large conspiracy in which they have agreed to falsify what happened at that time and that in concert with one another they have fabricated evidence in order either to claim compensation or to receive an apology. That seems an extremely serious allegation.

If there is no such allegation, we must accept the individual statements from witnesses that they thought that they were participating in cold research. Why did they think that? They are clear that it was in the notice. They may have picked up a great deal by rumour. However, it is extremely clear that no proper explanation was given to the young men when they went to Porton Down. It is a disgraceful story and a disgraceful episode in our past. Now, only a handful of Porton Down veterans remain. Surely the time has come not merely to apologise but to compensate for what was done.

Even if they have suffered no ill effects — although clearly they believe that they have — what was done was so unacceptable that compensation should be paid by way of an apology. I deeply regret the attitude of the Government, although they are not the only ones

involved in this and I would not suggest that they were, in trying to maintain the fiction that those people did not believe that they were going to assist with research into

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the common cold. There are times when Governments should say, "Wrong was done," even if the matter was in the past. If living beings are still affected by the wrong that was done, they should receive justice. All we are asking for is a common courtesy, the sense of fairness for which this country used to be renowned and, above all, a recognition that innocent young men, who trusted authority, were betrayed.

2.35 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden)

(Lab): I should like to make a short contribution on behalf of my constituent, Arthur Ashley of Legion court in Morden. When he was 18 years old and working as a signalman on HMS Vanguard, he received a signal from the Royal Navy asking for volunteers to take part in tests for smog and the common cold. Despite many years of searching, there are still no records of any signals having been sent. That point has been replicated in all the contributions so far. My constituent passed the signal to his comrades and, like many of them, decided to take part in the trials.

He says that he is "one of the lucky ones", because the ill effects of the trials have not been as bad for him as for his comrades. He was 18 at the time of the trials. He is now 68. At the time and in the immediate aftermath of the test he felt a burning sensation in his eyes and had a sore chest and problems with his skin. In the 50 years since the test, he has suffered from continual skin complaints. He has also suffered dizziness, chest complaints and ear problems.

Irrespective of the health effects of those tests, which may or may not be fully attributable to the Porton Down tests, what makes Mr. Ashley most upset is that he loved the Navy. He joined at 15 and rose through its ranks to become a lieutenant. He feels betrayed by the service that he so much loved. Like so many others, Mr. Ashley feels that the MOD should compensate veterans for the pain that they have suffered and that there should be a public inquiry into what happened at Porton Down. It was wrong to ask young men to take part in trials without telling them what was to be involved. Mr. Ashley feels that he has been duped and that that was not right.

That all happened 50 years ago. One of the happy truths that has emerged from the Porton Down campaign is that it could never happen now. Our attitudes have changed: we no longer operate in a cold war environment and society is much less

servile. Irrespective of compensation or whether there should be a public inquiry, I hope that we can do the right thing and say that it was wrong to dupe those men into taking part in those tests. I hope that we can walk away today agreeing that duping servicemen to take part in tests was wrong and I urge the Minister to apologise for the actions of a different set of officials under a different Government in a different age. It will help constituents of mine, such as Mr. Ashley, to move on.

2.38 pm

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East)

(Con): I commend the hon. Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) on his initiative in securing the debate on what really went on at Porton Down. It enables me to raise the

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experiences of two constituents, one of whom has sadly died, whose health was undoubtedly and permanently impaired as a result of the service volunteer programme.

In his reply, I hope that the Minister will go further than when he addressed the House earlier this year in response to the experience of a former constituent of mine, Douglas Shave, which my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms), who is in his place, raised in his Adjournment debate on 10 January. In my view, Wiltshire police and the doctors of St. Thomas' hospital have now collated enough evidence of ill health and premature death to support an independent public inquiry without any further delay.

It was such a public inquiry that my constituent, Mrs. Maureen Rossiter, sought when she came to my surgery nearly two years ago. She is adamant that her husband, and servicemen like him, were duped into going to Porton Down, where they were subjected to horrendous, outrageous experiments and then discarded. Her husband, Vernon Rossiter, volunteered to research the common cold for two weeks at Porton Down in 1958. He arrived on 14 April. He was fitted with a respirator, given an antidote for nerve gas, had his chest punctured by needles, which led to a collapse of his lung, was hospitalised and was sent home on sick leave a week early. He suffered health consequences for the rest of his life and died in 1985. A post mortem examination found that both lungs were overweight, with one grossly so.

Mrs. Rossiter pursued her own investigation with the Ministry of Defence, which she found a frustrating experience because of the negative attitude that she encountered, so she sought my help. In his letter to me of 23 July 2003 the Minister referred to an invitation that Mrs. Rossiter had received to visit Porton Down, check her

husband's record and discuss her concerns with staff. She attempted to take up the invitation but was told that such visits had been suspended. She has since learned from others that such records are incomplete or non-existent.

In response to her suggestion that her husband had responded to notices calling for volunteers to research the common cold at Porton Down, the Minister told me that no evidence to support that exists, despite in-depth searches by the Ministry of Defence and the Wiltshire police. It is suggested that former volunteers may be confusing the notices they claim to have seen with those calling for volunteers to attend the common cold research unit located at Harnham Down. No. That does not wash.

It would, of course, be surprising if notices and posters calling for volunteers had survived the abolition of conscription in 1958. However, the memories of those who responded to the notices remain clear. It was to go not to Harnham Down but to Porton Down, and those who have returned to Porton Down to check their records recognise it as Porton Down and not Harnham Down. A former assistant secretary in Mr. Speaker's Office, who has now retired, recalls typing such a notice calling for volunteers to research the common cold at Porton Down.

A letter appeared in The Daily Telegraph of 12 July 2003, from Lieutenant-Commander P.J. Grigsby RN, about the apparent lack of evidence. It stated:

"I was surprised to note that 'the essential piece of evidence — the poster' has not been found. I remember them well, and saw them frequently during my time in the Royal Navy ... They were

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issued as Admiralty Fleet Orders (AFOs), later to become Defence Council Instructions (DCIs), designed to promulgate to the fleet information that needed to be acted on early. The calls for volunteers at Porton Down were classed as temporary, but appeared regularly. They all had a reference number starting at 1 on the year of issue (e.g. AFO 1/54), and a binder was supplied for each year's issue. Somewhere within the public records at MOD historical branches there will be complete sets of AFOs/DCIs. The detectives should look again."

Thus I hope that the Minister will be more positive today on the subject of the call for volunteers to research the common cold at Porton Down.

I shall not dwell for long on the experience at Porton Down of a second of my constituents, Michael Paynter. In May 1954 and again in

March 1955, as a conscripted national serviceman in the RAF, he volunteered to be the subject of research into the common cold at Porton Down. On both occasions that involved going into a gas chamber without any protective clothing apart from a gas mask. He has not enjoyed his previous robust good health ever since.

I described his symptoms in my Adjournment debate of 16 October 1996. It was possibly the first such detailed reference in the House to what went on at Porton Down and was responded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), the then Minister of State. He stressed that neither of Mr. Paynter's visits and studies involved his exposure to any chemical warfare agents and said that the programme of work in which Mr. Paynter participated was part of the Government's research programme to investigate the causes and effects of London smog.

It must already be clear from this debate that a great many questions about Porton Down remain unanswered. However, thanks to Operation Antler and the outcome of the inquest on Ronald Maddison, which found that his death was unlawful, we are slowly but surely getting to the truth. It would be a credit to the Government if they were to admit the truth, which is that past Governments have allowed conscripts to be used as guinea pigs to research the effects of lethal gases such as sarin, by encouraging them innocently to volunteer for research into the common cold and London smog at Porton Down, that as a consequence those young men's lives were damaged or destroyed and that that is a great national scandal. It deserves a public inquiry and compensation without any further delay.

In a press release of Tuesday 25 April 1995 entitled "Labour highlights human experiments at Porton Down" the then shadow Defence Minister, the late Derek Fatchett, said:

"The Labour Party is calling for the Government to act over claims that soldiers who volunteered for experiments at Porton Down have suffered serious damage to their health.

We are very concerned at claims by some ex servicemen that they were not adequately informed of the risk involved in testing, and that they have suffered long term damage to their health.

Other Governments are beginning to acknowledge that their testing programmes may have put the health of service personnel at risk. It is time the British Government did the same and investigated the claims of the Porton Down volunteers."

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Nine years after Derek Fatchett's statement, that is precisely what the House should today call on the Labour Government to do.

2.45 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow) (Lab): What could be more powerful, more moving, than the testimonies that we have heard from the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson)? Please forgive me if I stick to one issue. I personally support the plea of my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall), who initiated the debate, for a public inquiry.

I was the last Member of the House of Commons to have the miserable experience of appearing at the Bar of the House as a result of a decision of the Privileges Committee. It was in 1967, and it was to do with Porton Down. I shall not bore the Committee with all the background, suffice it to say that it was a cause célèbre that the then Home Secretary, James Callaghan, decided that he would not vote. For a Home Secretary not to support the Privileges Committee raised all sorts of questions. Other Cabinet Ministers also declined to vote on that occasion. It is of little consequence that I was nearly expelled. It is of far greater consequence that justice should be done to those who were victims at the time of my national service.

Some years later, a very honourable Conservative, the late Sir Harry Legg-Bourton—I held him in high esteem, as I believe his colleagues did—came to me apologetically and said, “I ought to tell you that it was friends of mine in the Ministry of Defence who put me up to telling the Chairman, the late Arthur Palmer, that he should raise what had appeared in *The Observer* after the Select Committee's visit to Porton as an issue of privilege.” For some years, I thought that that had been done in vengeance, as I had been a terrible nuisance to the Ministry of Defence in respect of the Borneo war, east of Suez, variable-geometry aircraft, Aldabra atoll and several other issues. Later, I discovered that it was not vengeance at all. To use a Scottish expression, it was to put my gas on a peep to stop my messing around with Porton—in case I should stumble on the terrible things that happened in the '50s and probably into the early '60s.

Harold Wilson told me after he had been Prime Minister for the second time that I was on his conscience. I asked if that was because of Porton, and he said that he would tell me one day. That never happened, as poor Harold Wilson got Alzheimer's, but I am absolutely convinced that

the Ministry of Defence at the time had decided to hide the dreadful, shameful thing that it had done. Incidentally, I gave my volumes of papers to the Wiltshire police and Detective Superintendent Luckett, and I have discussed the matter with Ken Earl and many others.

The issue is not a matter of party. My hon. Friend the present Minister cannot be blamed and current officials cannot be blamed. Indeed, I told Mr. Luckett that I strongly agreed with him that there should not be prosecutions, because anyone being prosecuted would

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be in their early 80s at least and most would be pushing up the proverbial daisies. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford is absolutely justified in asking for a public inquiry and for justice. For the people I have met, justice—a recognition that a wrong was done to them—would be more important than monetary compensation. I therefore strongly support the plea that has been made.

2.51 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): For nearly 22 years it has been my privilege to represent Porton Down in the House of Commons. I know of nobody at Porton Down who is not deeply troubled by what happened 50 years ago and, indeed, more recently. I know of no scientist who would sign up to the accepted norms of behaviour then or who would claim that what is done today is not very much better. I have always thought that it would have been far better to hold a public inquiry than to have the matter referred to the coroner's court in Wiltshire. I support the hon. Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) in that respect and I am glad that he has secured this debate.

The testimony of my colleagues is surely enough to move deeply anybody who was not aware of what went on at Porton Down in the past and to persuade them that there is still a lot of ground to be covered. The issue is not over. The coroner's court has made its decision and the Ministry of Defence, for legal reasons that are perhaps obscure to the layman, will pursue its judicial inquiry, so we shall not muddy those waters. However, it is my job, on behalf of my constituents, to make it absolutely plain just how important the work of Porton Down is.

What we have heard is one side of the story. However, I shall not rehearse the other side of the story, because I have no mandate to do so. I was eight years old in 1953 and have no recollection of what happened. The Father of the House is right that there should not be prosecutions of the old men who were operating under orders 50 years ago and that what is needed is an apology

for the things that happened, which is even more important than any monetary compensation.

If Porton Down did not exist, it would have to be invented, and very quickly indeed. In the minds of many people the place is shadowy and mysterious a home of the dark arts likely to generate extravagant language. Locally, however, we are proud of Porton Down. Without it, the United Kingdom would be a more dangerous place in which to live, and Her Majesty's forces globally would be undoubtedly be at greater risk. Indeed, the lives of thousands upon thousands of British servicemen and women have been saved because of the work at Porton Down over many years.

As the hon. Member for Bedford said, the issue goes right back to 1915, when chemical weapons were first deployed against British troops and the carnage was appalling. In 1916 work started at Porton Down, and by 1918 anti-gas defence and respirator development was established, as well as work on the dissemination of chlorine, phosgene and mustard gas. By 1991, however, the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment had emerged, still in the Ministry of Defence. Next door, the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research, which was split off in 1979, has become part of the Health Protection Agency, under the Department of Health,

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and the old CBDE has evolved into the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, in the Ministry of Defence.

Back in 1956, Britain abandoned any sort of chemical or biological warfare capability, and restricted work to hazard assessment and defence. Work continues today on developing the means of prophylaxis, therapy, rapid detection and identification, decontamination and protection of the body against nerve agents, which attack through the eyes, skin and respiratory tract.

It is important to remember that the science at the two Porton Down establishments is world class. Following the 9/11 attacks in the United States, the Science and Technology Committee, of which I am a member, undertook an inquiry into the scientific response to terrorism. We took evidence in the White House, the centre for disease control in Atlanta and the Laurence Livermore laboratories in California. Everywhere we went, Porton Down was praised for the quality of its science and the expertise of its staff. Most of the research is published and peer reviewed. Links with academia and industry are increasingly important. Spin-off applications are growing—such as the fabric coatings that were developed to protect Her Majesty's forces and are now used in aerospace, health care, sports wear, overalls and consumer

and electronic goods, as well as by the military—and, recently, the development of the polymerase chain reaction process by the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory that is leading to rapid in-the-field testing for diseases such as foot and mouth, tuberculosis in cattle, genetic modifications in food at the point of sale, and tests for pathogens such as salmonella, listeria and E. coli.

All of that began with the processes that have developed at Porton Down since 1916, and none of it would have been possible without the help of volunteers from the very early days. As knowledge has increased, risks have been identified and protocols developed to protect volunteers and staff alike, and working practices have changed. For many years, no studies involving service volunteers have been conducted without the approval of the independent ethics committee, in line with the 1964 Helsinki declaration on the ethics of human experimentation. That committee has just two MOD members and nine representatives of the medical, legal and academic professions, plus lay people.

Porton scientists are at the cutting edge of blue skies research, as well as industrial innovation and clinical application. Their first duty is to Her Majesty's forces, but long before 9/11, they were Britain's front-line response to homeland defence too. When emergency service exercises take place, Porton-trained police, fire crews and ambulance staff are first on the scene, followed swiftly by scientific response teams from Porton Down. Back home, the laboratory staff work overtime, analysing suspicious substances, while their DSTL partners develop security scanners and intercept equipment such as that through which we pass at airports every time we travel.

In order to understand how chemical and biological agents wreak their havoc, and how to defend the human body, we have to understand what agents disrupt, and how nerves work. Therefore, it is not surprising that Porton scientists are also at the forefront of research into Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's and other diseases.

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Partly because of the blanket secrecy in bygone ages, there has always been confusion about four local institutions. The oldest chestnut—and, my goodness, have we heard it here today concerns Harvard hospital, not Harnham Down, that is something quite different. Harvard hospital, which was Britain's common cold research unit, received thousands of volunteers, mostly civilian, who contributed to our knowledge of virology. It closed in the 1980s, having failed to cure our colds, but not before it had made a major, if unexpected, contribution to treatment for HIV/AIDS.

There is no evidence that Porton Down ever undertook any work on the common cold.

In addition to DSTL Porton, and the Health Protection Agency Porton Down, there is the army camp at Winterbourne Gunner, at the western end of Porton ranges. Generations from all three services have been trained there, in nuclear, biological and chemical defence. The defence centre has now been joined by the police national chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear centre. Thousands of police, ambulance and fire personnel, from every force in the UK, are now fully trained first responders in their communities, and journalists working with troops on dangerous deployments, whether in Iraq or elsewhere, are briefed there too.

Mr. Dalyell: Who wrote all that?

Mr. Key: I did, based on 22 years of experience as Member of Parliament for Porton Down. This is my work, and I am very proud of it. I have to read enormous scripts of rubbish written by journalists about Porton Down, and even when one hears the BBC talking about Porton Down, it is always "the Government's top secret germ warfare establishment." I wish that people would snap out of it, get real and move into the 21st century. At the heart of Porton Down—that web of security—there are many thousands of highly motivated scientists and support staff who are part of our community in south Wiltshire. It is not some secret, behind-the-wire, white-coated colony of aliens. They are real families who shop at Tesco, sing in our choirs, join in our sport and leisure activities and bring to our local schools a high profile for science education.

That is the reality of Porton Down today. I do not for one moment detract from anything that my hon. Friends and hon. Members have said about what may have happened and what did happen in the past. I have said that I would support a public inquiry. It is infinitely preferable to the coroner's inquest, which was an inappropriate forum. An apology is due for what went on 50 years and more ago, but please do not confuse history with the reality of the modern defence of our homeland and Her Majesty's forces.

3.1 pm

Dr. John Pugh (Southport) (LD): This has been an emotional but fairly well reasoned debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) on having initiated it.

I pick up from the previous Adjournment debate introduced by the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms). As I understand it, the ministerial response went something like this: most people know Porton Down

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and therefore when going there have certain expectations; most probably knew the nature of likely tests conducted there; and, so far hitherto no clear connection has been established between the health problems that have subsequently shown up among veterans and the exact treatment that they received at Porton Down.

I got into the issue through a constituent, Mr. Kenneth Burns, who was an army chauffeur and one of those who thought that he had volunteered to assist with common cold research. He certainly did not know what Porton Down was for, and he certainly did not know the nature of the research conducted on him. When asked to put on a gas mask, he was apparently told, and I believe him, that he was there to test whether the masks chafed not because it was a necessary part of the experiment. None the less, a bigger dose of sarin was inflicted on him than killed Ronald Maddison. Mr. Burns described to me the departure of Ronald Maddison and the suspicious way in which his corpse was disposed of.

If I accept that over a period the causal link between the tests and subsequent ill health is difficult to establish, that the intentions of the people at Porton Down were honourable, that the risks were expected to be low, the research worthwhile and the wider benefits considerable, that the volunteer programme was justifiable, and that the current Government act in good faith when commissioning epidemiological studies and providing information, it remains the case that my constituent and others' constituents were exposed without their consent to a process that could have killed any one of them and certainly killed Ronald Maddison.

If anybody other than a Government put at risk the health of an individual in that way, there would at the very least be a case for damages, and in all probability a criminal prosecution would not be out of place either. As the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) pointed out well, Porton Down can be defended against that specific charge, and I have made it as specific as I can, only by branding as liars hundreds of serving soldiers who were informally briefed if not formally told that they were in fact engaged in cold research.

I met my constituent almost by accident. I was just out canvassing that day. He did not seek me out with a thirst for compensation, and I believe his side of the story. It may be said that veterans have a motive for telling their story in their way, but it may equally and probably more forcibly be said that the Ministry of Defence has a bigger motive, because behind Porton Down may lie

other stories related to different incidents — Korea, the Gulf war and so on. We may be on the verge of opening an ugly can of worms. Why else would the Government challenge an inquest decision arrived at fairly?

Being casual with the lives of soldiers belongs to the past, and we all agree on that. However, there may be something worse than that, which is pretending to maintain better standards, and in doing so, stringing out investigations while awaiting the death of the complainants.

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It has already taken 50 years to get the truth about the Maddison death, and there can be little excuse for further delay. The Government can either make restitution and acknowledge errors or brand a host of perfectly decent veterans as liars there are no comfortable choices left.

3.5 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I join the hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh) in congratulating the hon. Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) on bringing this matter before us. Like the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), we have all heard the moving testimonies about the plight of hon. Members' constituents. Although I represent Aldershot, I am fortunate in that none of my constituents has come to me as a result of having participated in the volunteer programmes at Porton Down. However, I understand the strength of feeling that my hon. Friends and other hon. Members have described.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), I pay tribute at the outset to the work done by the DSTL, whose headquarters are in my constituency. As he said, it does a vital job. Indeed, its work has never been more important than it is today, with the free world facing a real threat from biological warfare agents, and we must acknowledge that. I have visited Porton Down, although I suppose that I did so with some trepidation, being armed with all the warnings that one receives and aware of all the adjectives that are applied to it, which my hon. Friend mentioned. Nevertheless, I and my colleagues on the Defence Committee were impressed by the work that was being done there. The tests that were carried out in the past were essential, as are those that continue to be carried out today, and all hon. Members will want to express their gratitude to the 20,000 volunteers who, over the past 50 years or so, have assisted a programme that is extremely important to the defence of the realm and to the security of our armed forces and the wider British public.

However, veterans deserve to be told the truth, particularly now that the cold war is over. In

particular, we need to know whether the scientists were acting within the bounds of the knowledge available then. To what extent were they aware of the risks to the lives and health of volunteers? To what extent were they prepared to take risks in that respect? As my hon. Friend said, the same people who work at Porton Down go shopping at Tesco, and none of us has any real basis on which to doubt their honourable intent. Were their predecessors, however, working within the bounds of available knowledge, or did they press ahead deliberately, knowing that sarin could fatally injure their volunteers? I noted from the reports of the inquest into Ronald Maddison's death that Professor Sir Ian Kennedy — as has been said, the Ministry of Defence has asked him to write a chapter on the Porton Down historical survey — said that scientists at the time were "acting on the edge of their knowledge" when they exposed volunteers to the "uncontrollable danger" of sarin. We therefore need to know whether the scientists were deliberately putting their volunteers at risk.

The hon. Member for Bedford made an interesting point about internal memos produced in the 1950s, which warned that the advice given to potential

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volunteers was misleading. That is very serious because it suggests that some people at the top realised that risks were being run, but they were not prepared to own up to them to the volunteers who were participating.

Another problem appears to be that the records were either incomplete or have since disappeared. We need assurances from the Minister that a rigorous record-keeping process is now in place. Although the Wiltshire police force concluded that there was no evidence that the volunteers were told that they were to participate in tests for a cure for the common cold, it appears from the testimony that we heard today, which is widely available, that the volunteers were under the impression that they were participating in such a test. The onus is therefore on the MOD to answer that accusation. It cannot be that all those individuals, from a range of disparate sources, have collectively imagined those defence council instructions on their vessels and thus all provide the same testimony, even if the Wiltshire police could not find those DCIs.

We welcome the Government's funding of a medical assessment programme and an epidemiological study, conducted under the auspices of the Medical Research Council. We believe that it is right to await the outcome of that research, which, as the Minister revealed, has been concluded.

The Minister indicates dissent.

Mr. Caplin: To recap, there are two studies: the historical study, to which I referred in my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall), and the other study, to which he also referred, which will be finished in 2006.

Mr. Howarth: I thank the Minister for that intervention, which is helpful and has put the matter on the record, but swift action will need to be taken once those findings are available. These people are in advancing years, and we owe it to them to ensure that the Government make the findings available as soon as they have been reached. I hope that that Government will be Conservative, and if I should chance to be Minister, I undertake to ensure that that material will be published forthwith and that action will be taken.

It is hard to resist the calls for a public inquiry, but we should await the results of the studies that are being undertaken, and seriously consider holding a public inquiry, if such an inquiry appears appropriate in the light of findings that further work needs to be done. It is very easy to promise public inquiries when in opposition, as the Labour party did, but it has not delivered on that promise in government. The easiest thing for me to do as Opposition spokesman is to call for a public inquiry, but I will not do so until those reports have been published. If they do not answer the questions that have been posed today, however, a public inquiry is the right answer.

Mr. Hall: Will the hon. Gentleman distinguish between the health and mortality study and the quality of the information that was made available to volunteers? Those are two distinct issues. There is a study into one of them, but not into the other.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right to make that point, which I take on board completely. It is

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of great concern that full information about what happened has not been forthcoming, regardless of the medical issues.

My own view is that those who contribute to the defence of the realm need to be compensated properly if and when they sustain injury in the course of their service. The volunteers gave every bit as much service to the nation as those in uniform on the front line. Furthermore, we need to be prepared to err on the side of the claimant. All too often, the MOD seems to want to make life so hard for claimants that only the most persistent win through. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) referred to that as a negative attitude, which I have noticed is

prevalent at the MOD. That culture should be changed.

I understand from what the Minister said in the Adjournment debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on 10 January that only 1,000 of the 20,000 volunteers have approached Porton Down since the free helpline number was initiated in 1998. That is only 5 per cent., a very small proportion. We are therefore not talking about a vast raft of people who are claiming that their health has been impaired as a result of the service that they gave, but about a very small number of people, and we owe it to them to err on their side rather than on the side of the Treasury. We must be willing to view their concerns sympathetically.

The war pensions system provides a means of assessing individual cases with recourse to an appeals procedure. Mr. Michael Paynter, an ex-Royal Air Force clerk, took his case to the war pensions appeal tribunal last year. It ruled that his eczema and chronic fatigue were attributable to exposure to sulphuric acid and what was called fake London fog. The system is therefore in place, but it does work. The tribunals need to be seen to be the ex-servicemen's friend, not an agent of the Ministry of Defence. That is a duty that the House should expect them to assume.

3.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Ivor Caplin): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) on securing this afternoon's debate. It has been a good debate, with contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdicombe), and the hon. Members for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson), for Salisbury (Mr. Key) and for Southport (Dr. Pugh). I shall try to refer to their views as I proceed.

I join the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) in praising the work of Porton Down staff. It might help if I inform the House of Porton Down's remit. Indeed, part of its remit was covered by the hon. Member for Salisbury who, I am pleased to note, writes his own speeches, despite provocation from others on such matters.

Porton Down provides safe and effective protection for the United Kingdom and its armed forces in the event of chemical or biological weapons being used against them. That area of research was recognised as being vital to our scientific response to terrorism by the Science and Technology Committee in its 2003 report;

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that, too, was mentioned by the hon. Member for Salisbury. We should not forget that although the service volunteer programme is an integral part of the overall research programme, it is only one aspect of it. Many of the technologies developed at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down have applications in the civilian sector, such as in vaccines and bacterial detection systems.

It is against that background that the service volunteer programme has operated at Porton Down for almost 90 years. Volunteers have been involved in research and development that has underpinned the United Kingdom's chemical and biological defence capability, in both detection and protective measures. As recent events in the middle east and closer to home have shown, that research is as relevant today as it was when the service volunteer programme began in 1916. Since then, around 20,000 volunteers from various parts of the services have participated in the studies, with many participating more than once. I mention that because it sets in context some of the numbers that have recently been quoted.

I accept that the number of participants was highest during the 1950s and 1960s, decreasing to a total of around 5,000 over the past 30 years. Currently, between 100 and 150 volunteers a year participate in the programme. They are involved in tests aimed at ensuring that the protective measures issued to our troops to counter the threat posed by chemical and biological weapons are safe and operationally acceptable before being introduced into service.

Historically, and particularly in the 1950s, volunteers were involved in studies to evaluate the effect of small amounts of chemical warfare agents on the ability of unprotected personnel to operate normally. Other volunteers were involved in trials to develop effective clothing and medical countermeasures to protect service personnel, or in assessing the ability of personnel to function with new equipment. Some 8,000 individuals took part in studies involving mustard gas, and some 3,000 in studies involving nerve gas. However, it is important to understand that many of those individuals would have acted as controls and therefore would not have been exposed to chemical agents, and that the majority of the studies concerned the assessment of protective clothing, which would have protected the individuals from exposure to the agents.

As I said in the Adjournment debate secured by the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) in January, that work is essential. It is equally important that such measures are evaluated in the safety

of a controlled environment, with full medical and scientific back-up. I remain in no doubt that our knowledge and technology in the complex field of chemical and biological defence would not have advanced without the contribution of volunteers participating in trials as part of the programme.

I am pleased to tell the House that the vast majority of volunteers who participated in the service volunteer programme are quite unconcerned about their attendance. Given the ongoing level of publicity and media coverage about Porton Down volunteers, including the establishment of the free helpline, which was set up in 1998, the House may have expected the

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Ministry of Defence to have received a large number of requests for information, but that has not happened. The helpline has received just over 1,000 requests so far.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, East suggested that visits have been suspended, but that is not the case. I undertake personally to ensure that his constituent can visit Porton Down.

Inquiries are motivated by different reasons — out of curiosity, or because of publicity or health concerns — but, whatever the reason, when they are received, staff at Porton Down begin the painstaking search of numerous experimental record-book entries describing the studies in which former volunteers were involved. The resulting information, which is sometimes complicated and often difficult to interpret, is then explained in the clearest possible manner and sent to the inquirer with an invitation to visit Porton Down to view the original record books and discuss any concerns with current members of staff. Quite a few former volunteers have accepted such invitations, and some have made several visits.

When former volunteers visit Porton Down, they may be accompanied by their political representatives. I suggested to the hon. Member for Poole in the January debate that he might like to carry out that function for his constituents' legal representatives, families or friends. Such visits have been successful, not least because we have given inquirers details about the services offered by the MOD, including the mechanism for former service personnel to obtain pensions if their health was damaged as a result of their time in service. That no-fault compensation is provided by the war pensions scheme. All former members of Her Majesty's forces who demonstrate that their ill health is attributable to service will benefit from such a compensation scheme.

I am aware that many former Porton Down volunteers are concerned about the way in which the trials were conducted. This point was raised by

both my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford and the hon. Member for Aldershot. The key theme that I took from both of their speeches is that it comes down to the question of whether consent was obtained: it was obtained—in accordance with the practice and procedures of the time, which was well over 50 years ago.

Mr. Key: I can confirm what the Minister says. I have spoken to the man who was in the gas chamber with Ronald Maddison who says he was aware of exactly what he was doing and that it had nothing to do with the common cold. He signed the consent form and went through with the trial.

Mr. Caplin: There are views that that is the case, but I do not want to comment specifically on the Maddison case for reasons of which the House is aware. I will come on to why we are taking the action that we are in a moment.

Volunteers were drawn principally from the three services, and were recruited through notices posted at military establishments. It appears, from surviving records, that in the 1950s and 1960s, volunteer intakes were requested from individual arms of the services at specific times of the year. The precise mechanisms for recruiting volunteers were arranged by the services themselves, not by Porton Down.

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I know, from the letters that I have received from hon. Members on both sides of the House, and from former volunteers, that many veterans recall volunteering to participate in studies at Porton Down to find a cure for the common cold. However, the chemical and biological defence organisation at Porton Down never carried out work on the common cold. As the House is aware, that research was undertaken at a Medical Research Council unit at Harnham Down, on the other side of Salisbury. Extensive independent searches by Wiltshire police during the five years of Operation Antler did not locate any documentary evidence to indicate that Porton Down recruited individuals on the pretext of common cold research. In fact, during the recent inquest into Ronald Maddison's death, the Wiltshire and Swindon coroner stated that there was

“no documented evidence of any campaign orchestrated by Porton Down, or directed by them, as to the recruitment of volunteers for common cold research.”

Mr. Atkinson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Caplin: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not doing so. I need to say a number of things and I do not have much time in which to say them.

The investigations by the police located documentary evidence that demonstrated that, from the 1940s to the 1960s, thousands of volunteers from the RAF and the Army participated in trials run by the Medical Research Council to assess the effectiveness of various flu vaccines.

I referred to the inquest about the late Ronald Maddison. It concluded on 15 November 2004. On 21 December, I announced to the House that I had written to the Maddison family apologising for the fact that Ministry of Supply employees at the then Chemical Defence Experimental Establishment at Porton Down proceeded with a test involving Ronald George Maddison on 6 May 1953, which led to his unfortunate death, and that the test was undertaken despite the fact that an identical test two days earlier had resulted in an adverse blood test result in one servicemen.

In my statement, I also said that the Ministry of Defence intends to challenge the inquest verdict of unlawful killing by way of judicial review. I confirm that, earlier this month, we applied to the administrative court for permission to proceed with a claim to judicially review the verdict of unlawful killing relating to the death of Ronald Maddison. The grounds of the application are the coroner's legal rulings and his summing up and directions to the jury. I also confirm that copies of the relevant paperwork have been sent to the interested parties.

I have noted the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford and others about a public inquiry. I do not believe that such an inquiry would answer their specific concerns. I share that point of view with the hon. Member for Aldershot. Wiltshire police has spent five years conducting an independent and comprehensive inquiry into the conduct of the service volunteer programme, which resulted in a number of cases being put to the Crown Prosecution Service.

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On that point, I want to reflect on what the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow, said about prosecutions. That is an issue that I will reflect on following the debate. I do not believe that a public inquiry could address the key question of whether there are any unusual patterns of mortality or cancer incidence among former volunteers: only epidemiology can do that. For that reason, we are funding the study that has been referred to, conducted under the auspices of the Medical Research Council. The study will track mortality and cancer incidences among former volunteers and a matched control group. It will conclude in 2006. As I said in the January debate, we will publish the results of that research because there will still be a Labour Government

at that time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bedford also asked whether we will include mental health in the study. The Medical Research Council advised before the study commenced that it would not be possible to study any other health issues, as those are not recorded centrally in the way that cancer incidence is recorded by the NHS cancer registry.

Another issue concerning former volunteers is that of compensation. Some veterans are under the misapprehension that the United States and Canada have issued apologies and paid compensation to participants in their test programmes. What those countries have done is acknowledge the service of test participants and express appreciation to their veterans. We have done that for our servicemen and women for many years and it is right that we should. It is correct that Canada is making one-off payments to those who participated in chemical warfare trials. That payment is in recognition of their service and not on the basis of ill health. I believe that our policy of paying compensation in cases where injury or ill health can be shown to be attributable to service or the Ministry of Defence's negligence is the right approach.

To illustrate the debt that we owe to the many thousands of servicemen and women who have participated in the volunteer programme through the years, imagine what would have happened if, during the first Gulf war, Saddam Hussein had used the large amounts of nerve agents that his armed forces possessed. It is probable that many people would have died, but we believe that relatively few of them would have been British. That would not have been a result of good fortune but a direct result of the contribution to the defence research programme made by service volunteers for a number of years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bedford also asked me about the Nuremberg code and its application to scientists in the 1950s. During the inquest, the coroner accepted that the Nuremberg code had not been incorporated into domestic or international law and an expert witness gave evidence that scientists in the UK in the 1950s did not believe that the code was aimed at regulating their conduct, as it was felt that they already complied with the principles fully.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must move on to the next debate.

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