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NEWS

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STUDY SUGGESTS CHILDREN OF VIETNAM VETS MAY HAVE INCREASED RISK OF BIRTH DEFECTS

Boston, Mass.--Men who served in Vietnam are more likely to father infants with one or more major birth defects than non-Vietnam veterans and men who did not serve in the military, according to a study published in the October issue of the American Journal of Public Health. The study, which did not specifically investigate the association between exposure to the herbicide Agent Orange and birth defects, showed that Vietnam veterans who had probable combat experience and who served for longer periods of time (and, therefore, may have had a greater likelihood of exposure to Agent Orange) were more likely to father children with defects than those who did not serve in Vietnam.

Ann Aschengrau, Sc.D., the principal author of the study, and her colleagues gathered data on more than 14,000 women who delivered infants at least 20 weeks' gestation from August 1977 until March 1980 at the Boston Hospital for Women Division of Brigham and Women's Hospital; 1,964 women fit the criteria for the study. Ashengrau, an assistant professor at Boston University School of Public Health, conducted the study when previously associated with Harvard School of Public Health.

Compared to non-Vietnam veterans, Vietnam veterans had a 1.7-fold increased risk of fathering infants with one or more major malformations. No significant increase in risk was noted for stillbirths, minor malformations, normal variants or neonatal deaths.

The risk of defects was higher in men who had served in the Marine Corps, had longer durations of Vietnam Service, enlisted and had initial occupational specialties in Vietnam likely to involve combat.

According to Aschengrau, no consistent patterns of defects were observed

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among the infants born with major malformations who were fathered by Vietnam veterans; instead, a variety of defects was noted. In addition, maternal and delivery characteristics appeared to contribute to some of the malformations, such as congenital dislocation of the hip and clubfoot.

Aschengrau says generalizations about the study should be limited to veterans who are demographically similar to the enrolled population; the women enrolled were predominantly white and college educated.

This study and previous studies have produced conflicting results concerning the risk of major malformations among Vietnam veterans. "Our study results indicate that this issue has not yet been settled," says Ashengrau. "It wll only be resolved when a study is conducted that looks specifically at Agent Orange exposure. The time frame for this is slipping away due to the half-life of Agent Orange."

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