

"Most Vietnam vets don't want to think about this," Ted Fetting was saying. "They want that war behind them. But what we all have to face is that it's risky for us to have kids. Our children must pay the price."

Fetting, a Vietnam infantry vet who now works for the Wisconsin State Department of Veterans Affairs, took part the other night in a Madison public forum on Agent Orange, the herbicide used extensively by the American military during the Vietnam war.

The forum was conducted before the Dane County Committee on Agent Orange, chaired by 8th District Supervisor Lynn Haanen, whose resolution before the Board created the committee last February to look into the needs of some 3,000 veterans in the county who might have been exposed to Agent Orange while in Vietnam.

While solid research is lacking, many Vietnam vets have charged that dioxin, a highly toxic byproduct of Agent Orange is responsible for many of their emerging health problems and their children's.

Haanen said her committee's concerns lay in four areas:

—Medical testing and treatment.

—Children's health problems resulting from veterans' exposure to herbicides.

## North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

—Education of the medical community.

—Financial problems for veterans as a result of medical expenses.

A Madison woman spoke—no, almost whispered—the terrible histories of her two children, both born with birth defects, which in her belief are related to her husband's exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam.

She stood there talking to us and I wondered how old she had been when Lyndon Johnson was President, standing there talking to us in his jumpsuit and exhorting all the young troopers to bring back that coonskin and nail it to the wall.

"For the first time in the history of the world," Rachel Carson had written in *Silent Spring*, "every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals, from the moment of conception until death . . . the synthetic pesticides have been so thoroughly distributed throughout the animate and inanimate world that they oc-

cur virtually everywhere."

That was written in 1962, when the big story was DDT, and neither dioxin nor Agent Orange was in the table of contents.

Someone in the back of the room asked the Madison woman if she could please speak up, and I thought, my God, you could put both hands over your ears and you would still hear her voice. How could you not hear?

She spoke up and told of her husband's symptoms. The testing of Vietnam vets at Chicago's Cook County Hospital seems to confirm that a lot of the vets have that in common, a tingling in the extremities, rashes, sudden loss of memory, neurological problems and depression. It is at Cook County Hospital, the Madison woman says softly, that many veterans and their families first hear about chromosome breakage.

"It was not until 1956," Rachel Carson had noted, "that new techniques made it

possible to determine accurately the number of chromosomes in the human cell—46—and to observe them in such detail that the presence or absence of whole chromosomes or even parts of chromosomes could be detected."

The whole concept of genetic damage by *something* in the environment was also relatively new in 1962, when Rachel Carson wrote, and was little understood, "except by the geneticists, whose advise is too seldom sought."

It is particularly instructive that Dr. H. J. Muller, a Nobel laureate in medicine from the University of Texas, in an early warning, declared that various chemicals—including groups represented by pesticides—"can raise the mutation frequency as much as radiation. . . . As yet far too little is known of the extent to which our genes, under modern conditions of exposure to unusual chemicals, are being subjected to such mutagenic influences."

"One of the most significant medical features of our time," observed the Australian physician and Nobel laureate, Sir MacFarlane Burnet, "is that as a by-product of more and more powerful therapeutic procedures and the production of chemical substances outside of biological experiences, the normal protective barriers that keep mutagenic agents from the internal organs have been more and more frequently penetrated."

The woman sat down and was followed by men who served in the 101st Airborne and who talked of their tingling extremities, and the sprayed firebases and the apparent reluctance of the VA to help them.

Ted Fetting says it's because not many people know *how* to help:

"There are only three doctors in the whole state well-trained in evaluating chemical exposure. And between 40 and 50,000 of us served in Vietnam.

"We were all exposed."

I thought of Bud Jordahl and his farmer neighbors, afraid to use pesticides and herbicides anymore.

Elixirs of Death, Rachel Carson called them.

That war, the veteran said. That war poisoned us all.