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Porton Down chemical weapons tests unethical, says report

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More than 400 military personnel were deliberately exposed to chemical weapons in government-run experiments which seriously breached ethical standards, an official report has concluded. The men were exposed to painful amounts of nerve gas and mustard gas by scientists at the Porton Down chemical warfare establishment in Wiltshire.

The report published yesterday was commissioned by the Ministry of Defence in 2000, following pressure from many veterans who complained that the experiments had inflicted lasting damage on their health. The ministry asked Professor Sir Ian Kennedy, an expert in scientific ethics, to evaluate the work of the Porton scientists.

Sir Ian criticised five sets of trials carried out during the second world war and the cold war. "I am persuaded there were trials, albeit a few out of the many thousands conducted at Porton ... when it may be said the research may not have met the ethical standards required of the researchers and those who approved the trials."

He added: "These trials clearly amount to serious departures from what should have been done. But, on the evidence of the survey, they are few in number and spread over several decades." He cautioned against judging the scientists by the moral standards of today's comparatively peaceful world. "The work was conducted in difficult times: during the 1930s with the memory of the great war and the threat of more war to come; during the second world war, when the survival of the nation was at stake; and during the acute tensions of the cold war, and, later, of civil disturbance," he wrote. "It involved research into agents which were deadly, or agents which had to be made safe. This must not be forgotten."

In the biggest of the criticised trials, Porton scientists dripped liquid nerve gas on to the arms of 440 men between 1951 and 1953, an experiment which was brought to an end when one of the servicemen, Ronald Maddison, died. Sir Ian said this experiment was "uncontrollably dangerous" and went "too far." He said that in 1945, the scientists tested nerve gas on eight men without knowing what it was, and then in 1951, without knowing "with sufficient certainty" the lethal dose of the chemical weapon.

In 1942, six men were exposed to mustard gas for five consecutive days - three suffered severe burns on their scrotums. Sir Ian doubted that the men consented to the experiment. He also places a question mark over another run of trials from the 1950s to the 1970s, in which the eyes of around 450 men were exposed to sarin nerve gas.

"The trials might be said by some to have constituted too great a step into the

unknown."

A total of 11,000 men were exposed to mustard and nerve gas in Porton experiments between 1939 and 1989.

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