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Experts question Fort Bragg investigation

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 8 (UPI) -- A domestic violence expert who advises the Pentagon said Thursday that the military should look into whether an anti-malaria drug associated with aggression and suicidal thinking could have triggered any of the recent incidents in which Fort Bragg soldiers are suspected of killing their wives and, in two of the cases, also killed themselves.

Army troops in Afghanistan and other malarial countries are routinely prescribed Lariam, which is also known as mefloquine.

At least one of the four Fort Bragg soldiers suspected of killing his wife this summer, Sgt. 1st Class Rigoberto Nieves, had almost certainly been given Lariam, according to an Army medical source familiar with Nieves' duty in Afghanistan.

Debby Tucker, co-chair of the Defense Department's task force on domestic violence and co-founder of the National Training Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence in Austin, Texas, said that in its review of the murders, the military should consider all factors that could have contributed. This would include any drug that can alter the patient's behavior.

Lariam has been blamed for psychotic episodes and suicidal behavior for more than a decade. The official product information sheet for Lariam, written by drug manufacturer Hoffmann-La Roche and approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, states that Lariam has been associated with aggression, paranoia and suicidal thoughts.

"It has to be considered," Tucker told United Press International in a telephone interview. "I think for us to know what the lessons are from these fatalities, we have got to look at everything that could have had a bearing."

Tucker said the need to consider every possible contributing factor is particularly important because -- at least so far -- the killings near Fort Bragg do not appear to have been preceded by a pattern of domestic violence.

"That is not at all typical," Tucker said. "In 80 percent of the cases you will see a clear progression."

Congress created the 24-member domestic violence task force in 2000 to help the Pentagon reduce domestic violence.

Army officials told UPI that they have no plans to look at a possible link between Lariam and the incidents because they do not believe the drug could have been a factor. They would not confirm that the soldiers took Lariam.

A Canadian government official who has investigated a murder-suicide attempt that he believes is related to Lariam also called for the Army to look at the drug's possible role.

"Given my experience investigating Lariam, it would seem to me it would be worth investigating," Canadian member of Parliament John Cummins said in a telephone interview.

He has studied reports of Lariam side effects among Canadian soldiers in the early 1990s, including the 1994 suicide of army Cpl. Scott Smith, who was stationed with the United Nations in Rwanda. Smith reported having hallucinations he attributed to Lariam months before he shot himself.

Nieves was with the 3rd Special Forces Group. He shot and killed himself after shooting his wife, Teresa, in a bathroom of their Fayetteville home on June 11, just two days after returning early from service in Afghanistan, according to police.

The rash of violence near Fort Bragg among soldiers also includes:

-- Master Sgt. William Wright, a special operations soldier, strangled his wife, Jennifer, at their Fayetteville home on June 29, then buried her body in a shallow grave, according to authorities. They said he confessed on July 19 and led them to her body. Wright, who had been back from Afghanistan for about a month, is charged with first-degree murder.

-- Sgt. 1st Class Brandon Floyd, 30, shot his wife, Andrea, in their home in Stedman, near Fayetteville, on July 19, then shot and killed himself. Floyd, a member of the secret counter-terrorism unit called Delta Force, had gone to Afghanistan in November and returned in January.

-- Sgt. Cedric Griffin, an Army cook, stabbed his estranged wife, Marilyn, to death in her trailer "at least" 50 times and set her body on fire July 9, authorities said. He is charged with first-degree murder. Griffin had not been in Afghanistan.

That incident was followed by the July 23 shooting death of an Army major. Investigators charged the officer's wife and 15-year-old daughter with murder and the death seemed unconnected with the stresses of deployment.

With respect to Lariam, Cummins several years ago looked into the case of Canadian army Cpl. Clayton Matchee, who in the Somalia operations in the early 1990s allegedly tortured and killed a 14-year-old boy who had snuck into the compound.

The incident occurred on what troops called Psycho Tuesday, the day they took their weekly Lariam dose. Matchee subsequently attempted suicide by hanging and suffered permanent brain damage.

Matchee's wife, Marj, told a Canadian newspaper at the time that when her husband was home from Somalia on leave before the incident, she woke up in the middle of the night to find his hands around her neck. Marj Matchee said her husband attributed his behavior to Lariam.

A formal inquiry into the incident concluded that no link to Lariam could be established "without extensive further investigation."

Cummins said he is no expert on the U.S. cases but said that Lariam certainly should not be ruled out.

"I'm not saying there is a connection [but] I wouldn't be surprised," Cummins said.

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