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Army eyes malaria drug in Bragg killings

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FAYETTEVILLE, N.C., Aug. 9 (UPI) -- The Army will look into the effects of a malaria drug linked to aggression and suicidal thinking in its investigation of a string of killings involving Fort Bragg soldiers this summer, some of whom apparently took the drug called Lariam during service in Afghanistan and killed their wives after returning.

"The Army Medical Department will investigate potential explanations for the recent spouse murders/murder-suicides at Fort Bragg," said a written statement to United Press International from the Army late Friday. "This includes a medical literature search on effects of the use of mefloquine/Lariam, although there is no evidence indicating its possible use had any impact on the behavior of the suspects."

Army officials this week refused to confirm whether any of the soldiers involved in the killings took Lariam, and officials at Fort Bragg said earlier in the week that the initial investigation would focus on possible marital difficulties between the suspects.

UPI confirmed on Friday that a Fort Bragg soldier charged with 1st degree murder in the death of his wife took Lariam while serving in Afghanistan before allegedly killing his wife just weeks after his return.

Thomas Maher, attorney for Master Sgt. William Wright, confirmed Friday his client took Lariam, also called mefloquine, meaning that at least two of the three soldiers who served there and allegedly killed their wives this summer also likely took the drug.

"He was taking it," Maher said. Maher said Wright didn't attribute any particular adverse effects to the drug, but "He felt like he was kind of floating when he got back" from Afghanistan.

Wright, a special operations soldier in the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion, strangled his wife, Jennifer, at their Fayetteville home on June 29, and then buried her body in a shallow grave, according to authorities.

Army officials have said it is unlikely Lariam played any role in the killings because some of the suspects in the recent rash of domestic violence near Fort Bragg did not serve in Afghanistan and one of the soldiers had been back in the United States for seven months, making a connection to the drug unlikely.

The Army medical officials headed to Fort Bragg are part of a review of military policies and programs related to the killings, according to Maj. Gary Kolb, Spokesman for the Army's Special Operations Command.

"If that includes a look at what they may have used in Afghanistan, they are in the position to look at that. All our records are completely open," said Kolb.

A second soldier suspected of killing his wife this summer, Sgt. 1st Class Rigoberto Nieves, had almost certainly been given Lariam in Afghanistan also, according to an Army medical source familiar with Nieves' duty there.

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.

Sgt. 1st Class Brandon Floyd, 30, served in Afghanistan from November to January as a member of the secret counter-terrorism unit called Delta Force. It is unclear if Floyd took Lariam, but Army troops in Afghanistan and other malarial countries are routinely prescribed it.

Floyd shot his wife, Andrea, in their home in Stedman, near Fayetteville, on July 19, then shot and killed himself.

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.

The deaths have been particularly mysterious because the cases involving the Special Forces soldiers do not appear to have been foreshadowed by a pattern of domestic violence leading up the killings.

"At this point there is no indication that there was a history of domestic violence," said Kolb.

In around 80 percent of cases, an increasing level of domestic violence predicated a killing, according to 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.

A UPI story published July 30 reported that scores of Peace Corps volunteers are coming forward saying that over the past 12 years they suffered paranoia, anxiety, hallucinations, memory loss and suicidal behavior they blamed on Lariam. Some of the reports include problems that patients said have lasted for years or months after they stopped taking the drug.

In a May 21 article, United Press International found evidence that the drug can cause mental problems so severe that in a small percentage of cases it has triggered suicide. Thousands of pages of internal Roche safety documents obtained by UPI showed the company tracking suicides and suicidal behavior and acknowledging that depression -- which it said can lead to suicide -- is a known side effect of Lariam.

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