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Army had 1996 Lariam warning

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 22 (UPI) -- Top U.S. Army officials were warned by 1996 that some special operations soldiers displayed such intense anger and erratic behavior after taking an anti-malaria drug that it scared family members and threatened to break up marriages, according to one woman who helped deliver the warning.

Debbie Lown, the wife of a former Special Forces soldier, told United Press International on Wednesday that she raised the issue of the drug, called Lariam, during a 1996 meeting of the Army Family Action Plan at Fort McPherson in Georgia attended by top Army brass.

"I told them there is a drastic change in these men's mood," Lown said. "We talked about how it (Lariam) caused marital problems. ... It literally changes somebody."

Lown said her own husband, John, became irrationally angry during and after deployments where he took Lariam, and she learned to anticipate his behavior when he took the drug. Lown said so many Army wives were bothered by the problem that they figured out its cause.

An Army issue paper obtained by UPI on the 1996 meeting said: "Family members of deploying soldiers are not informed of the adverse reactions and severe side effects of pre-, during, and post-deployment medications (e.g., anti-malaria type drugs). The potential drug-induced side effects/adverse reactions present an increase in family pre- and re-deployment anxieties."

Earlier this month, UPI reported that three of the Fort Bragg soldiers suspected of killing their wives this summer had also been given Lariam, also known as mefloquine, when they were in Afghanistan this year. Lariam has been associated with reports of aggression, psychosis and suicidal thinking, according to the manufacturer.

One of the soldiers linked to the killings near Fort Bragg this summer was almost incoherent and visibly shaking while describing marital problems to a neighbor. Another became unable to control his anger at his wife in public, startling those who knew him. A third puzzled his new neighbors with his strange behavior.

Archie Watson, the father of one of the victims, told UPI on Wednesday that his son-in-law, Master Sgt. William Wright, had uncharacteristic fits of rage and difficulty talking since returning from Afghanistan.

"The last four weeks before this happened, my daughter said he would go into a rage every now and then," Watson said about Wright, accused of murder in the strangling death of his wife Jennifer on June 29. Watson said Wright would sometimes inexplicably stop talking and walk out of a room in mid-sentence.

The Army has said that marital problems are the focus of its investigation into the spate of killings, although there does not appear to be a history of domestic violence in any of the cases.

"As far as I know, he never did hit her," Watson said. "If you have marital problems, you get a divorce."

"I would not have dreamed that anything would have made him this violent," Watson said about his otherwise "gentle" son-in-law whom he had known since Wright was a boy.

The Army said Wednesday that it was considering sending an epidemiological team to Fort Bragg to study all of the medical and behavioral aspects surrounding the killings, including Lariam or other medications.

UPI has been conducting a six-month inquiry into the side effects of Lariam, which has been given to some 22 million people worldwide. Responding to inquiries from UPI earlier this month, the Army at first said it would not look into a possible link between Lariam and the killings because the drug is safe. The Army said it would cooperate if Cumberland County officials, where Fort Bragg is located, wanted to examine the impact of Lariam on the cases.

"There are hundreds of thousands of soldiers who have taken mefloquine," said Army spokesman Lt. Col. Ryan Yantis on Aug. 5. "We have no indication at this time that this drug is anything other than safe and effective in its proper use."

But on Aug. 9, the Army sent a statement to UPI saying that the Army Medical Department would conduct a "medical literature search on the effects of the use of mefloquine/Lariam" to see if it could be linked to the killings, "although there is no evidence indicating its possible use had any impact on the behavior of the suspects."

During the investigation of Lariam:

-- UPI reported in May that mounting evidence suggests that the drug has caused such severe mental problems that in a small percentage of cases it has led to suicide. In thousands of pages of internal documents obtained by UPI from Lariam's manufacturer, Hoffmann-La Roche, the company tracked increasing reports of suicides, suicidal behavior and other mental problems among Lariam users.

-- In July, UPI reported that scores of Peace Corps volunteers are coming forward saying that during the past 12 years they suffered crippling paranoia, anxiety, hallucinations, suicidal behavior and physical ailments from taking Lariam.

Debbie Lown, the woman who warned the Army in 1996 about Lariam's impact on families, said she and other wives concluded that Lariam was a problem when their husbands would change personality, become suddenly angry or behave oddly after deployments where the men took the drug. That behavior would eventually go away with most men, but would return, worse, after the next deployment when they took Lariam, she said. Wives were shocked when their husbands would blow up over the smallest things.

She speculated that special operations soldiers were prevalent in the rash of violence near Fort Bragg because they are so often deployed and take Lariam frequently.

Wright's attorney, Thomas Maher, said his client had been taking Lariam on and off for 10 years.

Since the 1996 meeting, the Army has put on the Internet a Deployment Medication Information sheet that warns soldiers to call their health care provider if they "develop unexplained anxiety, mood changes, depression, restlessness, or confusion" while taking Lariam.

Lown said she supports the Army and understands how important it is to prevent malaria, but that the Internet warning is "hysterical" because it is so insufficient. Lown said that soldiers and their families need to be told directly and bluntly about the real risk of serious side effects from Lariam.

Lown's husband later left the Army, and they live near Fort Bragg, where they knew the Wrights casually through church. She said she had no doubt that Lariam turned the Wrights' marital problems into a lethal situation.

"It (Lariam) has a negative impact on your system. If you had a bad marriage, you are going to have a terrible marriage."

An Army spokesman did not respond to requests Thursday for comment.

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(J.S. Newton, a free-lance writer, contributed to this story.)

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