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Congress to military in May: Lariam use?

By Mark Benjamin and Dan Olmsted
UPI Washington Bureau Chief
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 27 (UPI) -- A month before the start of this summer's string of killings and suicides involving Fort Bragg soldiers, a House Armed Services Committee member asked the Pentagon about possible risks to troops from an anti-malaria drug linked to aggression and suicide.

Rep. John McHugh, D-N.Y., sent the letter about the drug, Lariam, to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on May 14. The military's 22-page response was dated Sept. 13, and the House Subcommittee on Military Personnel that McHugh chairs is currently reviewing it, according to his spokeswoman Dana Johnson.

Three of the four soldiers at the North Carolina base who are suspected of killing their wives in the incidents that began June 11 had been given Lariam when they served in Afghanistan this year, United Press International reported last month. Two of those soldiers then killed themselves.

Monday, McHugh's subcommittee is set to hold meetings in nearby Fayetteville with military and civilian experts that will focus on domestic violence in general. Lariam is not on the official agenda but is likely to come up and "is definitely a priority for Congressman McHugh," spokeswoman Johnson said.

In McHugh's May letter to Rumsfeld, a copy of which was obtained by UPI, the congressman requested that the Defense Department "review its current operational use" of the drug because of reports of mental problems. He noted more than half of people reporting side effects cited at least one mental problem.

Among the 10 questions for which he sought a "prompt and complete response" was whether there are "health risks to military personnel of continued mefloquine use." McHugh also asked about what warnings soldiers receive when the drug is handed out, and how much it would cost to switch to another drug.

Johnson had no comment to make on the Defense Department's response.

The company licensed by the Army to manufacture Lariam, Hoffmann-La Roche, released a statement last month saying that "it is important to note that Lariam is not associated with violent, criminal conduct." Army officials have said they consider it unlikely that the drug was a factor in the string of domestic killings at Fort Bragg.

In July, Roche added a warning to Lariam's official product label of rare reports of suicides and said that mental problems might occur "long after" taking the drug. It also said for the first time that patients should be told to quit taking the drug if they experience mental problems because they could signal the beginning of "a more serious event."

The Army said on Sept. 20 that it had recently learned of the new warnings and would seek a "clarification" from Roche.

UPI has been conducting an eight-month investigation of Lariam and reported on May 21 that evidence suggests the drug has caused such severe mental problems that in a small percentage of cases it has led to suicide.

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