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## Army Fort Bragg study faces scrutiny

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From the [Washington Politics & Policy Desk](#)

Published 11/8/2002 6:08 PM

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 8 (UPI) -- An Army report released Thursday saying a controversial malaria drug called Lariam was an "unlikely" factor in a cluster of killings and suicides near Fort Bragg, N.C., this summer has sparked claims the military is covering up problems with a drug it invented and licensed.

"Our military said there is no problem with (Lariam) because they developed it," said Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich. "The hardest thing to do is develop a drug and then admit there is a problem."

The Army report on the Fort Bragg killings and suicides cites marital problems, increased stress in a post Sept. 11 environment and "flawed" systems for helping troubled soldiers and their families as common threads in a string of five homicides near Fort Bragg in a 43-day period during June and July 2002. Three soldiers involved had been deployed to Afghanistan. Two of those soldiers also committed suicide.

Soldiers and their families are afraid to report or seek help for problems because it is a "career ender," the report said.

But in one of the killings, friends and neighbors of the soldier charged with the murder said the Army is ignoring evidence the drug might have played a role. The Army said Thursday it did not contact those people out of concern about privacy and an ongoing criminal prosecution.

In Afghanistan, where at least two of the soldiers in the Fort Bragg killings took their Lariam pills, a U.S. security expert said the Army is ignoring frightening side effects he has seen first hand.

"The Army does not want (the truth) released," said Tony Deibler, deputy director of U.S. embassy security in Kabul and a security expert for 26 years with the U.S. diplomatic staff. "If we (the government) admit this, we are opening ourselves up to a multi, multi, multi-billion dollar lawsuit. I love my country, but this is what drives that train."

Deibler said he has seen Lariam wreak havoc on soldiers for years, including one Marine at an embassy who hallucinated intruders attacking and shouted, "Get back, they're coming!"

Deibler said Marines guarding the embassy in Kabul take doxycycline -- an alternative to Lariam -- because of concerns about the side effects.

"Lariam is a bad drug," said Deibler. "You take these guys at Fort Bragg. I will bet you a year's pay that these guys were taking it and when they got back, they wiggled out."

The report says Lariam, known generically as mefloquine, "does not explain the clustering" of violence because the Army only has evidence that two of the soldiers took the drug in Afghanistan and no mental problems were on file for those soldiers.

The report does not rule out Lariam as a cause in those two cases, but does say Lariam does not explain the strange cluster of violence over a short period of time.

"We are not in a position, nor did we have adequate information to say definitively that the possible ... side effects of Lariam played absolutely no role" in the deaths, said Col. Dave Orman, a psychiatry consultant to the Army Surgeon General, and a member of the review team. "What we can say is that it does not explain the clustering of these cases in that period of time."

Lariam's label warns of psychosis, hallucinations, delusions, paranoia, aggression, tremors, confusion, abnormal dreams and rare reports of suicide. It also says mental problems can last long after taking it. The Walter Reed Army Institute of Research developed Lariam in the 1970s after troops in Vietnam contracted malaria despite taking chloroquine -- then the standard preventive medication.

Friends of one of the soldiers said the report ignores mounting evidence that the drug might have played a role in some of the violence near Fort Bragg.

"No one talked to me from the Army at all," said Debbie Lown, an acquaintance of Master Sergeant William Wright, the one soldier who took Lariam in Afghanistan who did not commit suicide. Wright allegedly strangled his wife, Jennifer. Lown's husband, John, is also a former Special Forces soldier who said Lariam made him lose control of his anger.

The Lowns and other friends and neighbors have described Wright's delusions, paranoia and tremors since he took Lariam in Afghanistan. Jennifer Wright's father, Archie Watson, has described Wright's sudden, uncharacteristic fits of rage after returning. There was no history of domestic violence in their marriage.

The Army cited privacy concerns and ongoing legal proceedings in a decision not to interview friends, family or neighbors who think Lariam might have played a role.

Thursday's report from the Army is the second time in two months the military has signaled that Lariam does not cause significant problems. In September, the Pentagon responded to concern about the drug from House Military Personnel Subcommittee Chairman Rep. John McHugh, R-N.Y. Side effects from Lariam "have been few in number and generally of low severity," the Pentagon wrote.

But the letter to McHugh also notes that the military and Lariam's manufacturer, Hoffmann-La Roche, have funded key scientific studies on Lariam. "This fact suggests at least the possibility of either commercial or institutional bias in the reporting of results," it says.

An internal safety report from Roche, obtained by United Press International, shows that reports of violent behavior have been coming in to the drugmaker and the Food and Drug Administration for nearly a decade. Roche said in a statement to UPI that there is "no medical or scientific evidence" that the drug can cause violent or criminal behavior and that incidents cited in its safety reports are anecdotes, not evidence.

Roche's 1994 safety report cites a 26-year old American woman who experienced "aggression, compulsion to ('stab') attack boyfriend and to use obscenities;" a man who destroyed a hotel room and window while psychotic and in the grip of a paranoid "fear of Nazis" that led to him being imprisoned and hospitalized; and another case described as, "psychosis -- hospitalization required, endangering himself and others."

The 1994 Roche safety report includes a reference to a patient "in U.S. military/Somalia" who was hospitalized suffering from "psychosis, confusion, depression, fatigue, hostility, agitation" and paranoia.

UPI has interviewed a number of soldiers who say Lariam has given them long-term mental problems since the U.S. military began widely using the drug on over 20,000 troops deployed to Somalia in the early 1990s. U.S. Army officials told UPI they never saw evidence of any problems with the drug there.

"There is so much darkness in your brain and so much violence. And you know what you are capable of," said G. Mayes, a member of the Army reserves who was called up in 1993. Mayes said that while she suffered no mental problems before then, the Lariam the Army gave her brought on hallucinations, confusion, depression, paranoia, suicidal thoughts and even thoughts of homicide that she struggles with to this day.

"You know that no one around you is safe. You do whatever you can to maintain the appearance of normalcy. It is all in your eyes and in your head. You know that if somebody pulls the right stunt, you are just going to snap their little neck and leave them there."

Mayes said she once bought a bottle of sleeping pills with the intention of committing suicide, primarily out of concern that she might kill someone else. "I decided to take two pills and think about it. I woke up the next day and put the pills away."

Other soldiers who took Lariam during Operation Enduring Freedom have described potentially deadly consequences from taking it.

A 27-year old Air Force Staff Sgt. named Kevin based in Little Rock, Ark., says he was suffering from tremors, delusions, hallucinations and black outs by the time he took his fifth Lariam pill in Pakistan during operations. That soldier, who wanted to go by his first name only and is on medical leave, said he struggles with frightening flashes of anger that could trigger the unthinkable.

"These guys who killed their wives and then themselves (near Fort Bragg). If they were having a reaction to Lariam I can totally understand why they did it. The patience level goes way down. You feel confused, and the anger and frustration level goes way up," Kevin said.

"The only reason I have not done anything to myself yet is because I think it is a one-way ticket to hell."

Another soldier was recently hospitalized with serious mental problems after taking Lariam in Afghanistan.

"He went, he did his fighting and now he is sick," said that soldier's mother, requesting anonymity because she said she fears retribution from the Army on her son. She said he is hallucinating and suffering from anxiety and depression and that she fears for his life.

"He exhibits all of these side effects. He was a normal human being," she said. "I want this drug off the market ... They are not going to do this to my child."

Congressman Stupak is the third member of Congress to raise questions about Lariam. In July, Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., called for an independent medical investigation to protect the health of Peace Corps volunteers, who are routinely prescribed the drug. In May, McHugh wrote to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, asking whether the drug's side effects were causing troops mental problems. His committee continues to work on the issue.

McHugh said about Thursday's report from the Army, "Regarding Lariam, while the Army found it was unlikely to have spurred the violence at Fort Bragg, our committee will focus on the results of a scientific, peer review now under way at the Centers for Disease Control."

A former FDA official said that if Lariam were at fault in killings, it should not be on the market.

"I do not know of any product that would be allowed to generate a psychosis that could stimulate someone to commit murder and be an approved drug," said Gerald F. Meyer, former deputy director of the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research who is not familiar with Lariam but is an expert on drug safety. "I do not know of any, and I cannot imagine one."

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Contributing: J.S. Newton in Afghanistan

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