

March 22, 2010

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

Last month, I met with Oregon National Guard veterans who had been exposed to sodium dichromate at the Qarmat Ali, Iraq water facility while protecting Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR) contractors in 2003.

I was distressed to learn about their continued difficulties in accessing proper care in the VA system. It appears that very few staff at the VA understand the hazards associated with exposure to sodium dichromate, which contains hexavalent chromium. In working with sick Oregon vets, I have learned about a common set of symptoms, including severe respiratory problems, sinus symptoms, skin lesions and rashes, and digestive problems.

I saw this firsthand in my recent meeting with Oregon veterans.

The veterans I met with report that medical staff at the VA are unfamiliar with the exposure and their symptoms. There does not appear to be a system set up to provide care or test protocols for these soldiers. Most of the soldiers I met were not told that there was a Gulf War registry. Only one, Larry Roberta, had been assigned a caseworker, and he is the sickest of the group. All are concerned about near- and long-term effects. All are concerned about VA care.

Fortunately, the military knows exactly who was serving in the area around Qarmat Ali, Iraq, which allows the VA to ensure that these Qarmat Ali veterans are given the appropriate testing and care.

I request that the VA take the following steps:

1. Reach out to all veterans known to have served at Qarmat Ali and offer to assist them in signing up for the Gulf War Registry.
2. Assign a case manager to each Qarmat Ali veteran's case.
3. Establish baseline testing for Qarmat Ali vets.

4. Disseminate information on appropriate testing and treatment of Qarmat Ali veterans to the centers and facilities treating these soldiers.
5. Ensure that disability work-ups include documentation of their toxic exposure as well as all other injuries.

I view these issues with great concern and look forward to a detailed and specific response. Our veterans and their families are making tremendous sacrifices for our nation, and I know that you agree that we have a responsibility to fulfill our promises and meet their health care needs.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
U.S. Senator