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Melissa Sweet

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## Royal Society warns of risks from depleted uranium

Peter Moszynski *London*

Urgent attention must be paid to the health and environmental consequences from the depleted uranium used in many of the munitions fired in Iraq, the Royal Society has warned.

The society has publicly backed the United Nations Environment Programme's call for a scientific assessment of sites struck with depleted uranium weapons, the immediate distribution of guidelines to minimise the risk of exposure, and the need to clean up remnants.

The Ministry of Defence insists that the effects of depleted uranium are strictly localised. But after growing concern over the risk of cancer, testing is now available to all troops that served in Iraq. Previous guidelines recommended monitoring personnel only "where they have been exposed to depleted uranium or

where there is a high probability that they have been so exposed."

In its new study on Iraq the UN Environment Programme states: "The intensive use of depleted uranium weapons has likely caused environmental contamination of as yet unknown levels or consequences."

The programme recently discovered leaching of depleted uranium into the water supply in Bosnia, seven years after the conflict there. It urges immediate access for monitoring teams.

The Royal Society has long been calling for further research into depleted uranium, and it cautions that soldiers and civilians may have been exposed to dangerous levels, contradicting defence minister Geoff Hoon's assurance that there was "not the slightest scientific evidence" to suggest that depleted uranium left a poisonous residue.

Professor Brian Spratt, of the society's depleted uranium working group, said: "It is highly unsatisfactory to deploy a large amount of material that is weakly radioactive and chemically toxic without knowing how much soldiers and civilians have been exposed to it."

The society estimates that 340

tonnes of depleted uranium were fired in the 1991 Gulf war. It says, "The coalition needs to make clear where and how much depleted uranium was used in the recent conflict in Iraq. We need this information to identify civilians and soldiers who should be monitored for depleted uranium exposure and to begin a clean up of the environment."

Few troops were likely to be exposed to dangerous levels, says the society. "However, a small number of soldiers might suffer kidney damage and an increased

risk of lung cancer if substantial amounts of depleted uranium are breathed in, for instance inside an armoured vehicle hit by a depleted uranium penetrator."

Warning that fragments of depleted uranium penetrators are "potentially hazardous," the society says that residential areas should be a particular priority. □

*Desk Study on the Environment in Iraq* by the UN Environment Programme is available at <http://postconflict.unep.ch>



A 30mm armour-piercing shell containing depleted uranium, used by NATO during air strikes in Bosnia in 1995 and found six years later

## GlaxoSmithKline takes legal action to block new controls on its smoking cessation drug

Melissa Sweet *Sydney*

Leading researchers have attacked the pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline for trying to block proposed new controls on the smoking cessation treatment bupropion (Zyban) in Australia.

The plan, which requires that patients have a second GP consultation to get a full prescription, was developed in response to concerns about costly waste of the treatment.

But the company has taken legal action, arguing that the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee does not have the authority to make changes once drugs have been listed for subsidy. The company also claims that the committee's procedures denied it natural justice.

Prominent researchers, including Professor Simon

Chapman, editor of *Tobacco Control*, resigned from a research group funded by the company, the Australian Smoking Cessation Consortium, in protest at the company's legal action.

Almost 500 000 prescriptions have been filled since bupropion was listed on the pharmaceutical benefits scheme in February 2001, costing the federal government \$A106m (£41m; \$66m; €60m).

But a study, based on interviews with 151 patients who were prescribed the drug in 2001, found that less than 20% of patients completed the full course of treatment (*Medical Journal of Australia* 2002;177:277-8). Less than half had any counselling or support, despite this being integral to the treatment's success.

"We regard the legal action being taken by your company as being not in the best interests of the prudent use of public money," Professor Chapman and colleagues wrote in their resignation letter.

The action, they added, "has almost certainly caused widespread damage to your company's reputation within the smoking cessation expert culture in Australia."

The researchers said bupropion had been prescribed to about 10% of Australian smokers, but this had had no obvious effect on the prevalence of smoking.

They noted that the company's consumer division recently hosted a dinner examining an apparent halt in the decline in the prevalence of smoking: "This stalling has occurred during the time when Zyban was listed by the pharmaceutical benefits scheme."

Concern about apparent wastage of the drug comes at a time of frustration among anti-tobacco activists over lack of funding for other tobacco control measures, such as mass media campaigns.

Tobacco control in Australia had stalled because of complacency and "ludicrous" levels of funding, Californian experts warned in a recent editorial in the *Medical Journal of Australia* (2003;178:313-4).

Meanwhile, the Australian Consumers Association has said that GlaxoSmithKline's action should remind doctors and researchers of the perils of involvement in industry funded groups.

The researchers involved in the consortium were furious that the company had not told them about the action in advance or sought their advice. Instead, they first learned of it at a conference several days after the hearing at the federal court.

Martyn Goddard, spokesman for the association and a former member of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee, said: "I'm very glad those people have resigned, but now they must be asking themselves whether they should have joined in the first place."

A judgment is not expected for some months. □