Tribunal declares Gulf war syndrome an "umbrella term"

Official recognition for Gulf war syndrome moved a step closer last week when a war pensions appeal tribunal granted a disability award to a former guardsman, saying that his illness was best described under the "umbrella term" Gulf war syndrome.

Daniel Martin, who served as an army doctor in the 1991 Gulf war, appealed against the Ministry of Defence's decision to reject his application for a war pension. He told the tribunal that he had a range of symptoms, including bilateral knee pain disorder, chronic fatigue syndrome, memory loss, depression, asthma, and arthralgia.

The tribunal panel stopped short of recognising Gulf war syndrome as a disease. The appellant, according to the ruling, "failed to produce reliable evidence to satisfy the burden of proof... in relation to whether [the syndrome] is a discrete pathological entity." But they agreed with the findings of Lord Anthony Lloyd's inquiry last year that "there is a Gulf war health effect."

The panel found that "veterans of the Gulf war later developed an excess of symptomatic ill health over and above that to be expected in the normal course of events. The term Gulf war syndrome is the appropriate medical label to be attached to this excess of symptoms and a useful umbrella [term] for that label," the panel added.

Owen Dyer *London*

More drug trials end early, hiding potential problems

A growing number of trials sponsored by the drug industry are halted early on the grounds that apparent treatment benefits have emerged rapidly. The warning comes from Canadian researchers whose review of 143 randomised controlled trials has found a "frequent failure to report relevant information" and "implausibly large treatment

effects" (*JAMA* 2005;294:2228-30).

The proportion of randomised trials halted early has doubled in the past 10 years, from 0.5% in 1990-4 to 1.2% in 2000-4. And the scientific validity of the data they provide is not proved, say the researchers from McMaster University, Ontario, Canada.

Dr Victor Montori, the lead investigator, said that researchers often fail to explain adequately why trials were stopped early and often claim "implausibly large treatment effects, particularly when the number of events is small."

Michael Day *London*

Bush announces US plan for flu pandemic

President Bush laid out the federal plan to tackle the risk of an influenza pandemic in a 30 minute speech on 1 November before six cabinet secretaries, top US health officials, and World Health Organization and United Nations' directors.

The United States will stockpile vaccines and antiviral drugs such as Tamiflu (oseltamivir) and Relenza (zanamivir), and accelerate the development of new vaccine technologies. Mr Bush said that the National Institutes of Health were working with leaders of the vaccine industry to replace the use of chicken eggs with a cell culture technology. He also called for liability protection for vaccine makers.

These plans would require emergency funding of \$7.1bn (£4.1bn; €6bn) from Congress, he said. Of this \$2.8bn would be used to develop methods to decrease the time needed to make a vaccine; \$1.52bn would purchase influenza vaccines; \$1.03bn would stockpile antiviral medications; \$800m would develop new treatments and vaccines; \$644m would go towards pandemic preparedness; and \$251m would be allocated to help other countries detect and contain outbreaks.

Fred Charatan *Florida*

See www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/healthcare.

Secret book deal to counter Canadian drugs exposed

Jeanne Lenzer *New York*

A secret scheme to scare the US public into opposing legislation that would allow the importation of Canadian drugs—drugs that compete with expensive US drugs—has been uncovered after a book deal went sour.

The fictional book about terrorists, a bit of sex, and poisoned Canadian pills was commissioned as part of an effort to cause US citizens to worry about the safety of Canadian drugs. The US ban on importing Canadian drugs combined with the exorbitant prices of US drugs means that many patients resort to internet purchases from Canada and elsewhere.

The scheme came to light after an argument between the book's writers and its backers when one of the writers alleged that a deputy vice president of the US Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), a US trade association, advanced \$100 000 (£58 000; €85 000) to commission the book.

Adding to the intrigue, the middleman who brokered the deal, Mark Barondess, a high profile divorce lawyer, was also a marketing consultant for PhRMA.

But Ken Johnson, senior vice president of communications for the trade association, denies that PhRMA directly commissioned the book. He would not acknowledge that a deputy vice president was involved in the book deal nor that Mr Barondess is a PhRMA consultant. He did say, however, that "to the best of my knowledge the book project idea was brought to an employee at PhRMA by an outside consultant." He added that money was paid to the consultant by PhRMA.

Mr Johnson declined to confirm the identity of the deputy vice president, although she was identified as Valerie Volpe by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and one of the authors later confirmed this to the *BMJ*. Ms Volpe did not return calls for comment.

Mr Johnson called the book deal "an underhanded and sneaky idea." He said, "We don't need to resort to Looney Tunes. We have credible, safety

based arguments against drug importation."

The secret scheme began to unravel when the book deal was scratched in July by Mr Barondess, who claimed that the manuscript was badly written.

But veteran ghostwriter, Julie Chrystyn, who was hired to write the book, and her coauthor, Kenin Spivak, a former Hollywood executive and entrepreneur, say that PhRMA's demands for script changes were at the heart of the problem. Mr Spivak told the *BMJ* that Ms Volpe wanted to make editorial changes that were incompatible with a successful thriller, such as "long polemics about a drug issue."

When Mr Barondess told the writers that the deal was off, Mr Spivak says that the two writers were offered \$100 000 to keep the deal secret. As part of the deal, the two writers would not be allowed to speak negatively about PhRMA or the drug industry for the rest of their lives. The writers refused the deal. Neither Ms Volpe nor Mr Barondess responded to requests for interviews with the *BMJ*.

While dismissing the book as a "screwball idea," Mr Johnson, said there was, none theless, reason for concern about Canadian drugs. He told the *BMJ*, "Drugs bought on the internet from Canada carry no guarantees."

Ms Chrystyn and Mr Spivak are still going to publish the book, but have changed the title to *The Karasik Conspiracy*. □