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Diagnosis follows dropped cowardice charge Anti-malarial drug is cited as possible cause of soldier's illness

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An Army interrogator sent home from Iraq and charged with cowardice last October is one of 11 service members who have been diagnosed with a balance disorder a Navy doctor says may be caused by Lariam, the anti-malarial drug given to deploying service members.

The diagnosis, said his lawyer, supports the soldier's claim that Lariam exacerbated what was otherwise a normal combat stress reaction.

Staff Sgt. Georg-Andreas Pogany was diagnosed at the Defense Department's Spatial Orientation Center in San Diego as having ototoxicity — inner ear damage caused by exposure to certain chemicals or drugs.

The condition, which results in hearing or balance problems, may be caused by Lariam toxicity, said Navy Cmdr. (Dr.) Michael Hoffer, director of the center. He said Lariam usage was the only common link he found in 10 of the 11 patients experiencing balance problems.

Pogany and his lawyer, Richard Travis, have always maintained that Lariam, known generically as mefloquine, may have contributed to the panic attacks that lead to his being sent home from Iraq.

"My hope is that they will consider Dr. Hoffer's report and finally give him the benefit of the doubt, to continue to ensure he gets the treatment he's getting, and get in writing that no administrative or punitive action will be taken. Otherwise this guy will continue to be in emotional hell," Travis said.

Pogany, who was attached to a group of Special Forces soldiers in Iraq in September, said he had severe panic attacks and relentless vomiting and dizziness — all possible side effects of Lariam, according to the drug manufacturer's literature — for several days after seeing an Iraqi man's bloody remains.

He said he sought help from his commanders but they told him to go away or they would send him home. Days later, he was sent home and charged with cowardice.

Pogany has maintained that his commanders ignored his symptoms of combat stress and failed to get him psychological treatment. He has spent \$13,000 in legal fees to fight the case.

Since his return home, he said he has had ongoing physical problems, including dizziness, balance problems and constant headaches and he believes Lariam is the culprit.

Pogany also has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and is scheduled to begin a three-week therapy session at the end of June at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington.

Travis said Pogany has been in legal limbo since the case hit the national news last fall. "What's tragic about this case is how long they've delayed making this decision," Travis said.

In November, the cowardice charges were reduced to willful dereliction of duty.

In December, Pogany said his commanders told him they would dismiss all charges. But they have never put their promise in writing and have not restored Pogany's revoked security clearance, Travis said.

He contends that Pogany's command has purposely delayed and interfered with medical treatment Pogany has sought for post-traumatic stress disorder and his other conditions, and has been unresponsive to requests for a final written decision on his charges.

Citing privacy concerns, a spokesman from the U.S. Army Special Forces Command declined to comment on the case.

Pogany has filed numerous inspector general complaints, alleging maltreatment, evidence tampering, obstruction of justice and reprisal, against his chain of command all the way up to the 10th Special Forces Group commander.

One included a reprisal complaint he filed in March with the Army inspector general. In it, he said the command tried to chapter him out after it learned he had filed a congressional complaint through Rep. Katherine Harris, R-Fla.

In response to his complaints, the Army Special Operations Command conducted an Article 15-6 investigation in May, but Travis said neither he nor Pogany have been notified of the findings.