

Most army veterans used in tests not compensated.

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CALGARY -- Fewer than a third of veterans used as human guinea pigs in chemical warfare tests dating back to the Second World War have received the federal government's compensation payments.

That's disappointing to the man who spearheaded efforts to acknowledge the decades of pain caused by exposure to chemical agents such as mustard and chlorine gas.

"I thought in my heart it would be more," said Bill Tanner, 79, of Kelowna, B.C.

As of Friday, 1,046 veterans or their heirs had been approved for the \$24,000 tax-free payment from the Department of National Affairs. That's far fewer than the 3,700 soldiers who volunteered for the tests in Suffield, Alta., and in Ottawa.

Tanner has suffered respiratory ailments as well as throat and bladder cancer since being exposed to poisonous gas trials on the Alberta prairie in 1945.

Although the experiments continued until the 1970s, most test subjects were teenagers during the war, recruited for \$1 a day and extra leave. Sworn to secrecy at the time, some honoured that pledge until their death.

"A lot of them have passed away and never told their families what happened," said Tanner, noting that others may be hospitalized in nursing homes and be unaware of the \$50-million program.

That's despite notification in 120 community newspapers and attention through the Royal Canadian Legion.

"This happened so long ago," he said. "A lot of these individuals are a lot older than me, in their mid to late 80s."

For almost 60 years, veterans who did seek pensions or help for the ailments that were byproducts of the experiments were disregarded and, in some cases, ridiculed.

It was only in 1989 that Ottawa acknowledged that soldiers were subjected to the blistering agent. Individual medical records have only been made available in recent years.

Former military ombudsman Andre Marin took up the veterans' cause and called the tests "a blot on (Canadian) history." Media attention on a proposed class action suit kept the issue in the public eye until the compensation program was announced in February 2004.

Despite the numbers, Tanner feels the program has been a success. He praised officials in Veterans Affairs and National Defence for cutting through red tape.

"They have bent over backwards to help and in many cases they have bent over backwards to give (someone) the benefit of the doubt," said Tanner.

Applications for the program were to be filed by March 31, but Lt.-Col. Brian Sutherland, who has been overseeing the program, said officials will still accept submissions from those who were unaware of the package.

Sutherland says more than 2,000 applicants have been denied. Almost 500 of those cases are being appealed.

Part of the confusion is that all soldiers, even today, are exposed to some level of some chlorine gas as part of their training.

"This money was paid to people who were used as human subjects for experimental use only," said Tanner. "There is a big distinction there."

Last month, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced his government would create an ombudsman to deal with veterans affairs.

Tanner, who sits on the advisory board for the military ombudsman, says such a role should be combined because of the overlap in problems between Veterans Affairs and National Defence.

Veterans Affairs Minister Greg Thompson said he plans to consult with the legion and the National Council of Veteran Associations to avoid overlap. In an April 7 letter, Thompson said he has asked his staff to develop options for how the office would operate.