

# V.A. to Study Toxins' Effects From 1991 Gulf War

By SCOTT SHANE

WASHINGTON, Nov. 12 — The government will spend \$15 million over the next year for research on the illnesses of veterans of the 1991 Persian Gulf war, the secretary of veterans affairs, Anthony J. Principi, announced Friday. He said it would concentrate on the role of neurotoxins, and not the stress and psychological conditions often implicated as a cause of the veterans' health complaints.

Mr. Principi also said the department would establish a research center to develop treatments for gulf war illnesses.

"The men and women who fought there deserve our undivided attention to their questions, to their symptoms, to their futures," he said. "They have been frustrated far too long."

He said his decision was guided by the findings of a committee of scientists and veterans that he appointed in 2002 to study the ailments of thousands of servicemen and women that persisted after the war.

In a report released at a news conference here, the panel, the Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses, broke with earlier study groups by pointing to chemical exposures during the war, not the effects of combat stress, as the primary cause of what has sometimes

been called Gulf War Syndrome.

The committee found a "probable link" between veterans' illnesses and neurotoxins, possibly including Iraqi nerve agents. That conclusion has heartened veterans, who resented earlier studies suggesting a psychiatric cause for their problems, but it

## Focus shifts from combat stress to chemical exposure.

disturbed some scientists who do not believe it is supported by solid data.

Mr. Principi said he became interested in the issue in 2001 after the Texas billionaire and former presidential candidate Ross Perot introduced him to a Dallas epidemiologist, Dr. Robert W. Haley, who has long argued for the neurotoxin theory. When he found that Clinton administration officials had never appointed a gulf war illness research panel, as required by 1998 legislation, Mr. Principi named the research committee and made Dr. Haley a member.

Mr. Perot attended the news conference and spoke passionately

about what he considered the government's previous unjustified insistence that the veterans' illnesses were psychological in origin.

"Our government has been in total denial," said Mr. Perot, who has long championed veterans' causes. He said the strategy had been to blame veterans' ills on "stress, stress, stress."

Lea Steele, a Kansas State University epidemiologist and scientific director of the committee, said its conclusions were supported by an accumulation of recent research, including 15 animal studies since 2000 showing neurological damage from low-level exposure to nerve agents.

She said many soldiers serving in the war were exposed to three sources of neurotoxins: Iraqi sarin nerve gas dispersed when weapons caches were destroyed; pesticides and insect repellents used by American troops on skin, clothing and tents where they camped; and the drug pyridostigmine bromide, given to troops to protect them against nerve gas.

Ms. Steele said that nearly a third of veterans of the gulf war report long-lasting health problems like chronic pain; difficulty with balance and memory; and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease.

She said the stress theory was un-

persuasive. "This was a brief war," she said. "Most gulf war veterans were not engaged in combat."

Some other scientists who have studied the veterans' illnesses reacted with skepticism to the panel's findings.

"I have followed this issue closely, and I have not seen any evidence that chemical exposures are responsible for many symptoms of illness in Gulf War veterans," said Dr. John C. Bailar, a retired University of Chicago health studies professor now at the National Academy of Sciences. Dr. Bailar was chairman of an earlier study group in 1996.

Dr. Stephen L. Joseph, a former top Defense Department medical officer who oversaw health evaluations of more than 30,000 gulf war veterans, said he was not persuaded that there was a neurotoxin link, partly because it was impossible to say which veterans had been exposed.

Dr. Joseph said that the Defense Department has estimated that 100,000 American troops were nearby when an arms depot at Khamisiyah, Iraq, containing some sarin nerve gas was destroyed in March 1991.

"Because there were 100,000 people around Khamisiyah doesn't mean all of those people were exposed," he said. "I don't see the epidemiology."