Agent Orange Victims Get Scientology 'Detox'

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HANOI, Vietnam (AP) — Vietnamese with ailments linked to Agent Orange are undergoing a "detoxification" treatment involving saunas and vitamins that was developed by the Church of Scientology and which has been criticized as pseudoscientific.

Scientologists use the "Hubbard Method" to try to cure drug addiction and alcoholism. The church set up a center in New York after the 9/11 attacks offering a similar service for first responders who may have been exposed to toxins.

A group of 24 people arrived for treatment at a military hospital in Hanoi for a month, free of charge, Dau Xuan Tuong, deputy administrator at the Vietnam Association of Agent Orange Victims, said Thursday. He said 22 people underwent the treatment in 2011 in northern Thai Binh province.

"Their health has improved after the treatment, and some saw their chronic illnesses disappear," he said. "We need to do more scientific research to determine its impact."

It was not possible to immediately get comment from the Scientology movement. Proponents have said the detoxification program improves people's quality of life.

The U.S. military dumped some 20 million gallons (75 million liters) of Agent Orange and other herbicides on about a quarter of former South Vietnam between 1962 and 1971, decimating about 5 million acres (2 million hectares) of forest — roughly the size of Massachusetts — to remover the foliage that concealed enemy fighters.

Dioxins in it have since been linked to birth defects, cancers and other ailments, but the United States maintains there is no evidence Agent Orange has caused the health problems among Vietnamese. Washington has compensated American soldiers for ailments they say were caused by the compound, however.

"I hope my wife and I will fully recover completely and will not suffer after-effects to pass on to my descendants," prospective patient Nguyen Dai Sang was quoted as saying in the Viet Nam News daily.

U.S. Embassy spokesman Christopher Hodges said Washington was not funding the program and said "we are not aware of any safe, effective detoxification treatment for people with dioxin in body tissues."

It wasn't known what other medical care the participants were receiving. Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard opposed psychiatry and the use of drugs for mental illness and addictions, but church members accept conventional medical treatment for physical conditions.

Actor Tom Cruise co-founded the New York Rescue Workers Detoxification Project, where participants were each given vitamins and nutritional counseling and participated in daily exercise and sauna sessions. He defended it at the time as helping the workers recover.

Critics, many of them scientists, have said there is no evidence the "Hubbard Method" does any good.

It was unclear if the Vietnamese government was aware of those concerns before agreeing to try the project.

Last month, the U.S. began a landmark project cleaning up toxins from the site of a former air base in Danang in central Vietnam. Part of the former base consists of a dry field where U.S. troops once stored and mixed the defoliant before it was loaded onto planes.

Washington has been quibbling for years over the need for more scientific research to show that the herbicide caused health problems among Vietnamese. It has given about $60 million for environmental restoration and social services in Vietnam since 2007, including to disabled people, but the Danang project is its first direct involvement in cleaning up dioxin, which has seeped into Vietnam's soil and watersheds.

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