

Battlefield Radiation. DU Vet: 'My Days Are Numbered'

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Gerard Matthew has broad shoulders and beefy hands. He's built like a bear. Yet as sturdy as this 31-year-old may look, he is a very sick man.

Matthew suffers, for example, from facial swelling, double and triple vision, muscle weakness, bouts of extreme anger that sometimes cause him to lash out at his wife, erectile dysfunction and, most serious of all, a tumor in the pituitary gland at the base of his brain.

"And these are just the big ones," he told the audience at the Foreign Correspondents' Club Japan in Tokyo earlier this month.

At home in New York, he said, he's got "a pharmacy" of medication — and he worries both for himself and his family that his "days are numbered."

All the more reason to speak at this media venue now, before things get worse.

Matthew was a specialist in the U.S. Army National Guard's 719th Transport Unit, and his job, from April-September 2003, was to drive trucks collecting war debris from around southern Iraq. He thinks that Samawah, the city where Japan has some 550 SDF members participating in the U.S.-led "coalition of the willing," was among the many locations he passed through.

Matthew believes the dust from spent depleted-uranium (DU) ammunition in his cargo accumulated in his lungs, irradiating his body and causing most of the ailments that trouble him today. Urine tests taken as part of a New York Daily News story investigation in 2004 showed that DU levels in his sample were up to eight times higher than in control samples from Daily News journalists. Matthew showed reporters a letter from the Department of the Army that rejected this claim.

Most pertinent to his audience at the FCCJ: Matthew worries that radiological contamination may be afflicting Japanese troops posted to Iraq — not to mention local Iraqis.

"I came all the way to Japan to convey the message," said Matthew, who, with his wife Janise was the guest of Tokyo-based activist group Campaign for Abolition of Depleted Uranium Japan. In other words, he believes that Japanese troops should be warned: "They may be susceptible to it."

With Janise, also 31, seated beside him on the dais, the couple together held up glossy photographs of their 1-year-old daughter Victoria, who was born without a right hand. It is a birth defect they both blame on DU.

“Yes, the military has paid for my education,” said Matthew. “But I would give all of that up to have my daughter with five fingers on her hand.”

The Matthew family is caught up in a raging worldwide debate over DU that extends into areas both scientific and geo-political.

Depleted uranium, an enormously dense and hard biproduct of converting naturally occurring uranium into fuel for nuclear reactors, is used by the U.S. military both in supertough armor plating for fighting vehicles and in “penetrators” — ammunition fired against armored vehicles and concrete emplacements that, instead of mushrooming on impact as regular bullets do, grows sharper as it bores forward and through.

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, 290.3 metric tons of DU projectiles were fired by U.S. forces during the 1990-91 Gulf War. By press time, the department had not responded to repeated requests for comment on Matthew’s case and current use of DU by the U.S. military.

Whatever the strategic benefits of DU ammunition, critics — including many in the scientific community — claim that particles of it released upon impact are easily inhaled by humans, either then or much later, and remain in the body for years, possibly causing cancers and many other health problems. With local Iraqis in mind in particular, Matthew said: “We’re hurting innocent civilians, and we don’t need to do that.”

The United Nations would seem to agree.

A 2002 working paper by the UN Commission on Human Rights itemized a long list of diseases and birth defects among Gulf War veterans, Iraqis and the offspring of both — linking them strongly to the use of DU.

The same UN working paper concluded that use of DU in warfare contravenes the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Charter of the United Nations itself; and, “in certain situations of armed conflict,” the Genocide Convention. The working paper, if read closely, also suggests violation of the Hague and Geneva Conventions.

The Pentagon, for its part, says on its Web site that radiation is not a “primary hazard” with DU “under most battlefield exposure scenarios.” Citing its own and several high-profile international studies, it concludes that DU is “40 percent less radioactive than natural uranium,” and is “not considered a serious external radiation hazard.”

That stance is, in large part, supported by the World Health Organization which, in its 2003 fact sheet No. 257, title “Depleted Uranium,” said that “for the general population, neither civilian nor military use of DU is likely to produce exposures to DU significantly above normal background levels of uranium.”

Consequently, some tough questions were to be expected at the Matthews’ news conference.

“How can you scientifically establish that the syndrome you claim has been caused by depleted uranium was caused by depleted uranium?” asked Naoaki Usui, a freelance reporter who described himself as a proponent of nuclear energy.

Matthew fixed his eyes squarely on his questioner. “Look at my daughter, and that should answer your question about the exposure,” he said. “My daughter is the evidence.”

Matthew said that his and Janise’s other children from earlier relationships were born without deformity, while genetic screening at a New York hospital turned up no predisposition to birth defects on either side of the family.

That being the case, Matthew said that he and eight other soldiers with similar symptoms — all of whom, except Matthew, were stationed at Samawah — have each sued the Department of Defense for \$5 million. His daughter Victoria, who to date has been denied disability benefits by the Social Security Administration, is also a plaintiff with her father — claiming an additional \$5 million. The cases are pending.

The plaintiffs are not alone in their battle. For years, U.S. and British veterans of the first Gulf War have demanded that their governments grapple more aggressively with the mysterious illnesses collectively known as Gulf War Syndrome — symptoms of which Matthew says match his own.

Movement on this front is afoot: BBC News reported earlier this month that the Pensions Appeal Tribunal in Britain had ruled that Daniel Martin, an ex-soldier and Gulf War veteran, could use Gulf War Syndrome as an umbrella term to cover the diverse health problems afflicting him. As a result, other British veterans hope this will improve their access to disablement pensions.

At his FCCJ talk, Matthew said he expected news from his lawyer upon his return home to the Bronx.

While he was still here, though, there was something else Matthew wanted to tell the Japanese. Describing his visit to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial some days earlier, he said: “I felt like I made a connection . . . because I was exposed to radiation just like they were. My own government did it to them.

“My government probably would not say sorry,” he added. “But I say sorry.”

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