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Geraldine and Matt Griffiths are starting a family in the shadow of possible genetic damage from Agent Orange. Picture / Alan Gibson

Pregnancy dilemma for Agent Orange family

Monday August 7, 2006
By Patrick Gower

It is unusual to hear a father-to-be describe the decision to start a family as "like playing Russian roulette".

But that is how Matt Griffiths sees it.

Mr Griffiths, the son of a Vietnam War veteran sprayed by Agent Orange, was born with a deformed leg that was eventually amputated.

He blames the deformity on genetic damage from his father's exposure to the herbicide.

Although he could not get an answer from doctors or the Government on whether his suspicions were correct or whether the genetic damage could be passed on to his children, Mr Griffiths and wife Geraldine decided to start a family.

She is now eight months pregnant.

Then, last week, the results of a study of 24 New Zealand veterans confirmed Mr Griffiths' worst fears.

It found they had genetic damage and indicated that it could affect their children and their grandchildren.

"It gave me the willies," said Mr Griffiths, who learned of the study by reading about it in the Herald.

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"But it wasn't a shock. It was just a continuation of what you thought has been going on all along - this all began with denial that people were sprayed at all. Then slowly, more and more comes out.

"That's why just about all veterans' descendants that I know have been scared about having children."

The Massey University study found that the people tested had damage to their DNA following exposure to the herbicide, which was sprayed by American forces to kill jungle cover and destroy food supplies of the enemy.

The study said the results warranted a larger study of New Zealand veterans and their children.

All this is too late for the Papamoa couple, who have been married for 13 years and have "done 13 years of our own research and debate into whether to have kids or not", he said.

They appeared in front of a royal commission to ask if there was any risk, and have hounded doctors and other medical services.

Finally they went ahead, and Mr Griffiths says the study's findings have not changed their mind.

"It has always been a leap of faith. And it probably always will be."

The 38-year-old forklift driver's battle to find out about Agent Orange has been a long one.

He was born a year after his father returned from the war, and the words "Agent Orange" are among the first he remembers. His father deserted his family, leaving his mother to raise him alone - one of his early battles was proving he was the son of a veteran.

He said: "This is what buggers you up. You don't feel like you can believe anybody any more."

Scans show all is well with baby and Mrs Griffiths, a nurse, "has been doing everything right".

And while Mr Griffiths may not be able to reverse any damage done by Agent Orange, he says he can be a much better father than his was.

"I'm not going to make the mistakes my father made. I'm going to be there, and the child is going to have a fantastic life."

Agent Orange

More than 76 million litres of the herbicide were sprayed over the jungles of Vietnam more than 40 years ago so the Viet Cong enemy could not hide.

It contained 2,4,5-T trichlorophenoxyacetic acid, dimethyl arsenic acid, 2,4- dichlorophenoxyacetic acid, and 2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzo-P-dioxin.

Veterans and their families who have battled serious health problems and birth defects have said for 30 years that Agent Orange affected them and their children genetically.

About 3300 New Zealand soldiers served in Vietnam, and about 2600 are still alive. The Ex-Vietnam Services Association believes that of those 2600, anywhere between a third and a half have conditions that could be attributable to a toxic environment.

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What now?

In April, a joint working group report recommended the Government apologise and give \$50,000 in compensation to each veteran poisoned by Agent Orange. The Government is still to approve this, and Defence Minister Phil Goff and Veterans Affairs Minister Rick Barker are to meet Vietnam veterans for discussions.

Last week, a Massey University study - the first of its kind - of 24 New Zealand Vietnam War veterans exposed to Agent Orange found they had genetic damage and said the results warranted a larger study of New Zealand veterans and their children. The Government says it is "open to new information" but has not said it will pay for the studies.

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