



Photo by Frank Moses

David Bona, a veteran's advocate, looks on as Marjorie Matchee speaks at the Veteran's Rally for Mefloquin Awareness last Wednesday on Parliament Hill. Matchee's husband Clayton was one of two soldiers held directly responsible for the beating death of Shidane Arone in Canadian custody in March, 1993. Matchee believes her husband, now in long-term care for brain damage after attempting suicide, was suffering from the effects of mefloquine poisoning on the night Arone died.

Mefloquine toxicity an ongoing issue

By Frank Moses

A group of experts and activists, along with soldiers and family members affected by mefloquine toxicity, spoke on Parliament Hill at the Mefloquine Awareness Veterans Rally last Wednesday.

Mefloquine is an anti-malarial drug that has been the subject of much controversy, with several veterans groups and health professionals claiming permanent psychological and physical side-effects from its use.

Speakers included Dr. Remington Nevin, the Vermont-based founder of the Quinism Institute, which seeks to educate the public on the dangers of mefloquine toxicity; David Bona, a Somalia veteran and one of the first campaigners for mefloquine awareness, and Marjorie Matchee, the wife of disgraced soldier Clayton Matchee, whose infamous beating and subsequent death of 16-year-old Somali Shidane Arone on March 4, 1993, shocked Canadians and was dubbed "Canada's Shame" in the media.

Matchee faced anonymous death threats and censure because of her husband's actions in Somalia and has spoken against mefloquine toxicity in interviews and rallies on numerous occasions.

"I make no excuses... I don't defend what he did," said Matchee. "But the man who committed those crimes was not the man I knew as a loving father and husband."

She observed behavioural changes in her husband when he was home from Somalia on leave before the beating death of Arone occurred. "He was having hallucinations and terrible nightmares, which he blamed on mefloquine," she stated.

Clayton Matchee hung himself in detention after his arrest in Somalia and is now in long-term care for serious brain injuries caused by his suicide attempt.

Also present along with her sister Nancy, who spoke on her behalf, was Val Reyes-Santisteban, the mother of Canadian paratrooper Cpl. Scott Smith, who killed himself in Rwanda on Christmas Day 1994, while serving on a UN mission to quell the bloody slaughter which eventually claimed over 600,000 lives. Scott was her only child.

Nancy Reyes recounted Smith's last satellite phone call to her sister, when he described his wish to have Christmas dinner on his return home in February. "He sounded cheerful," she said. But only hours later, Reyes-Santisteban received the call that would forever change her life — Smith had shot himself and was dead.

Smith had spoken of the effects of mefloquine to his family and comrades and even to a reporter for what is now called Canadian Shipper magazine. He said that the malaria drug had given him nightmares and hallucinations.

Trent Hollahan, a retired paratrooper

Anti-malaria drug is still being issued to Canadian Armed Forces personnel decades after it was linked to extreme psychological and physical side effects

who was on the Rwanda mission, worked with Smith the day of his suicide. He remembered, "We were tasked to go to an orphanage to deliver toys and clothes and interact with the little orphans. This was at Christmastime and we wanted to share a little joy and happiness with those poor unfortunate children."

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Marjorie Matchee

"We returned to the stadium in Kigali later that afternoon and settled into a normal routine. From the best of my recollection, Scott walked up the stairs to the DNS room, exited the stadium, and as he did, he bent over and talked with his butt cheeks like Jim Carrey does in his movies. I remember the troops getting a chuckle out of that, and not one minute later he had walked around the corner and took his own life.

"He was awesome soldier and a fantastic young man and he is missed dearly by the people who knew him and loved him."

Hollahan said he suffered from vivid nightmares when taking the drug as well. "Seeing and dealing with what we did was tragic and horrific enough for the human brain, but I blame mefloquine for the depths of the tragic despair we have endured during and since that deployment."

Mefloquine was first tested at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, or WRAIR, in the 1970s, where it was one of 250,000 compounds studied to find a preventative and treatment for malaria. It was later licensed for manufacture by Swiss company Hoffmann-La Roche under the brand names Lariam, Mephaquin and Mefliam, among others.

The drug has a troubled history, including the flawed trial undergone by members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment in 1992-1993 in Somalia. Soldiers who took the drug on the Somalia mis-

sion claimed they were never warned of its side effects. In fact, it was a trial in name only.

Health Canada's protocols for drug trials are normally very thorough and include careful observation, interviews with trial subjects at regular intervals, and discontinuation - or in this case - replacement of the drug when subjects show adverse side effects.

For Canadians serving in Somalia, the sole protocol most remember was to have soldiers gather in groups and ingest it together, so as to ensure compliance. The soldiers took a once-weekly pill that many say caused vivid nightmares, nausea, and in some cases - extreme paranoia and hallucinations.

Many Somalia veterans claim adverse side effects from taking the drug as prescribed, but because no data was taken, only anecdotal evidence exists. Psychological side effects were common enough in Somalia to be given names — "meflo-maires" and "Nightmare Mondays" being the most memorable.

Somalia was dangerous enough. Many medical professionals believe armed soldiers on a dangerous mission should not have been tested with an unproven drug. The Somalia Inquiry heard testimony that medical files were updated to document mefloquine exposure only after the mission was complete.

The Health Canada website states the following in their overview of mefloquine: "Health Canada reviewed the potential risk of rare long-lasting and permanent neurological and psychiatric adverse events with the use of mefloquine because it has been an ongoing concern in Canada and internationally. The current Canadian product information for mefloquine warns about neuropsychiatric adverse events including depression, tinnitus (a persistent noise or "ringing" in the ears), dizziness or vertigo (the sensation of motion of self or one's surroundings). These adverse events may last for months or years after stopping the medication. Patients should consult a healthcare professional if these adverse events happen and in order to be prescribed another medication to prevent malaria. Mefloquine should not be prescribed to patients who have or have had serious psychiatric disorders."

"The safety review focused on all the evidence available to date to determine whether there was a potential link between the use of mefloquine (for malaria pre-

vention) and rare long-lasting or permanent neurological and psychiatric adverse events, as well as how often these adverse events happen and how serious they are. Another goal of the review was to identify factors that may put certain groups of individuals at increased risk and ways to manage these risks. In this review, a "long-lasting" adverse event was considered to be one that lasted 90 days or more after stopping the use of mefloquine."

Canada is not the only country grappling with mefloquine toxicity.

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Class action lawsuits have been launched on behalf of veterans affected by mefloquine in countries including Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Dr. Remington Nevin is founder and executive director of the non-profit Quinism Foundation. He is a board-certified occupational medicine and preventive medicine physician and former U.S. Army medical officer and epidemiologist.

Nevin defines quinism as a family of medical disorders caused by poisoning by mefloquine and related quinoline drugs. He spoke at the rally of his foundation's struggles to get quinism recognized by health organizations and governments.

The Quinism Foundation's goals include supporting education on research and it has called on Veterans Affairs Canada to screen recent Canadian veterans for symptomatic mefloquine exposure. Nevin claims mefloquine adversely affects the brain and brain stem.

The Quinism Foundation's website claims, "Mefloquine exposure may be

the cause of several disabling conditions, including dizziness, vertigo, tinnitus, loss of balance, and mental health issues. These symptoms are often misattributed to other conditions, including traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder. For this reason, use of the White River Mefloquine Instrument, or WRMI-2, should be considered standard of care during the evaluation of veterans at risk of mefloquine exposure."

The two-question WRMI-2 assists in identifying Canadian veterans with disability from dizziness, balance issues, and other conditions potentially caused by mefloquine exposure.

There is some positive progress on this front. The Quinism Foundation has partnered with Spartan Wellness, a veteran support and cannabis therapy company founded by nine former members of the CAF.

Spartan Wellness will include WRMI-2 in its intake assessments of clients and identify those with potential mefloquine poisoning for further testing.

Activists believe that governments should ban mefloquine and re-open the Somalia Inquiry in order to fully investigate the drugs effects, including what role it may have had in the death of Arone.

NDP MP Cathy Wagantall spoke in Parliament as the rally was in progress and again the day after. She admonished the Trudeau government for defending the use of VA funds to treat convicted killer Christopher Garnier, who murdered off-duty police officer Catherine Campbell in September 2015, while ignoring the plight of veterans suffering from mefloquine poisoning.

In the House of Commons on Sept. 25, the Conservatives introduced a motion calling on the Liberal government to "Revoke the Veterans Affairs Canada benefits that have been extended to Chris Garnier." The motion was defeated 151 to 127 by the Liberal majority.

In August, 2009 Hoffmann-La Roche stopped marketing Lariam in the United States, long after its potential link to demonstrable and lasting side effects in soldiers from at least five countries, but to date, none of the class action lawsuits launched by veterans groups are known to have been settled.

However, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, or VA, has recently awarded several disability claims to veterans for permanent neuropsychiatric conditions, including anxiety and insomnia, that it has concluded were because of exposure to mefloquine while serving in the military.

As Canadian troops serve in their latest mission in Mali, mefloquine is still available as a treatment for the prevention of malaria. Many troops, having heard the horror stories from previous missions overseas, may risk a disease of the body - to avoid one of the mind.