

Secret Science: how governments experiment on people

In 1963 the UK's Ministry of Defence's Porton Down military science centre carried out the first of a series of tests to release zinc cadmium sulphide in the atmosphere over Norwich.

It was one of many examples of secret experiments conducted in the name of military research during the 1950s and '60s, now chronicled for the first time in a new book by University of Kent historian Professor Ulf Schmidt.

The book, entitled *Secret Science* (Oxford University Press), provides the most comprehensive overview to date of state military scientific research on chemical and biological weapons by Britain, the US and Canada since the First World War. It shows that the history of human and animal experimentation should not be seen as a national issue but rather in the context of an international network of expert scientists.

It also highlights how breaches of medical ethics have been more widespread and systematic than previously assumed – and were carried out over a prolonged period of time. This led Professor Schmidt to challenge the claim that ethics violations on both civilians and soldiers were 'isolated' incidents.

Professor Schmidt further considers how the medical ethics of experimentation have evolved – and suggests that further changes could yet see a more ethical approach that would not compromise the state's ability to test new weapons.

Using little-publicised examples, such as the Norwich zinc cadmium sulphide experiment, Professor Schmidt exposes the ways in which chemical and biological experiments touched on the lives of ordinary people as well as military personnel.

Although he acknowledges that Britain's atmospheric trials may not have posed an immediate health hazard to the public, Professor Schmidt points out that the government was well aware, as the Chief Scientist warned in 1963, that 'public . . . knowledge of them by unauthorised persons could be politically embarrassing'.

Professor Schmidt highlights the historical context of such experiments. He writes: 'As an island nation, Britain was widely believed to be particularly vulnerable to large-scale chemical and biological attacks. During the Cold War, research and development activities reached far beyond the identification and testing of ever more toxic chemical compounds in the secure confines of Porton's experimental landscape. With an estimated total of over 750 field trials carried out by Porton between 1946 and 1976, Britain was turned into a large-scale open-air laboratory; her people into an army of unconsenting participants'.

In the same period as the Norwich tests, many other people - mainly service personnel - volunteered to take part in experiments. *Secret Science* poses the wider question as to why human beings participate in such experiments. In many cases, Professor Schmidt suggests, the scientist 'takes on the role of the seemingly selfless father figure, assuring his subjects that their joint enterprise will ultimately, in some distant future, be of benefit to the greater good; resources and human sacrifice are an apparently inevitable necessity'.

Although Professor Schmidt identifies that in many cases secrecy impacted on medical ethics in relation to issues of informed consent and full disclosure, he concludes by arguing that secrecy and medical ethics do not have to be mutually exclusive.

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Notes to editors

1.

Ulf Schmidt is Professor of Modern History, Director of the Centre for the History of Medicine, Ethics and Medical Humanities at the University of Kent, and principle investigator of the Porton Down Project on the history of chemical warfare research during the Cold War. Professor Schmidt is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. He was previously Wellcome Trust Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, and Senior Associate Member of St Antony's College, Oxford University. In 2004 Professor Schmidt was appointed by HM Coroner for Wiltshire and Swindon as one of the principle expert witnesses on informed consent in the Inquest looking into the death of Leading Aircraftman Ronald Maddison, a British serviceman, who died after being exposed to the nerve agent Sarin in 1953.

2.

Established in 1965, the University of Kent – the UK's European university – now has almost 20,000 students across campuses or study centres at Canterbury, Medway, Tonbridge, Brussels, Paris, Athens and Rome.

It has been ranked: third for overall student satisfaction in the 2014 National Student Survey; 16th in the Guardian University Guide 2016; 28th in the Sunday Times University League Table 2013; and 22nd in the Complete University Guide 2015.

Kent is ranked 17th in the UK for research intensity (REF 2014). It has world-leading research in all subjects and 97% of its research is deemed by the REF to be of international quality.

Along with the universities of East Anglia and Essex, Kent is a member of the Eastern Arc Research Consortium (www.kent.ac.uk/about/partnerships/eastern-arc.html).

The University is worth £0.7 billion to the economy of the south east and supports more than 7,800 jobs in the region. Student off-campus spend contributes £293.3m and 2,532 full-time-equivalent jobs to those totals.

In 2014, Kent received its second Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher and Further Education.

