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Ex-Rad, the U.S. Military's Radiation Wonder Drug

By Van Hipp

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These are tragic and tense days indeed in Japan.

The immense loss of life and absolute devastation caused by last week's earthquake and tsunami is heartbreaking – and serve as the culprits in this unimaginable tragedy. The tension, felt by its citizens and far beyond the country's borders, centers most immediately on what happens next at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility.

Reports of radioactive contamination and a potential meltdown at the complex have many Americans wondering how prepared our own government would be in the event something similar occurred here. More specifically, could the the health of residents living near a severely damaged nuclear reactor in the U.S. be ensured?

Thanks to the advanced work of the men and women who develop our nation's military medicine, the answer is yes – but only if the government now takes the necessary steps.

In what has to be one of the greatest accomplishments in the history of military medicine, the U. S. military has developed a radiation protection drug known as Ex-Rad that can give protection through DNA repair against otherwise lethal dosages of radiation. Ex-Rad, which is administered as an injection or orally, can be given either before or after exposure. While Ex-Rad officials are continuing to work with the FDA, it has successfully cleared two clinical studies showing it is safe.

Ex-Rad's life-saving utility isn't limited to countering radiation exposure near a compromised nuclear facility. From potentially enabling cancer patients to withstand greater levels of radiation to protecting soldiers deployed into radioactive "hot zones," this drug delivers critical help and hope.

During most of the last decade, U.S. military scientists at the Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute have worked with some of the best scientists in the American private sector to develop this radiation protection wonder drug.

As someone who's had the privilege to interact with these scientists over the years and watch the development of Ex-Rad, I've seen it grow from just a dream into a very real capability that can save lives.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of media awareness about its development in the U.S., Ex-Rad is probably the most important new drug the American public has never heard of. But thanks to the public writings of senior scientists from the U.S. Department of Defense, the private sector, and the prestigious Radiation Effects Research Foundation (based in Hiroshima, Japan) the secret about this breakthrough drug is finally getting out. And it's happening not a moment too soon.

The U.S. Army recently recommended to the Office of the Secretary of Defense that Ex-Rad be stockpiled for the benefit of our military. That puts the ball in the court of Pentagon leadership to make certain one of military medicine's most successful achievements in recent years is fully realized and able to benefit Americans.

With our nation facing a litany of threats today, American scientists at government agencies including the Departments of Defense, Energy, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services among others are developing mature technologies and counter-measures with the potential to save millions of lives. Many of these life-saving discoveries have positive and far-reaching implications well beyond the narrow scope of that particular department. Ex-Rad is just latest example of medical innovation being developed by our military. Although we don't hear about it, we need to hear more and we to support it.

The challenge for the Obama administration is to ensure that these various efforts are well coordinated and communicated throughout the government – and that the American taxpayers are ultimately provided the return they deserve on their hefty investment.

There's something for Congress to keep in mind as well.

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Some on Capitol Hill have questioned the value and relevance of U.S. military medicine in recent weeks. Obviously, these members have forgotten their history lesson on the significant contributions of Dr. Walter Reed and others who helped wipe out disease and save lives. They've also forgotten that when the Bush administration sought the creation of a real-time biological defense capability for the American people, it turned to the Pentagon and military medicine.

There's no doubt about it, medical results trump political rhetoric every time. Ex-Rad is just the latest evidence that U.S. military medicine is meeting our most difficult medical challenges and leading the way in saving lives.

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