

## Armed forces announce plan of attack on environmental hazards

Canadian soldiers are exposed to unique health threats that, until recently, have not been assessed. But that's changing, says Lieutenant-Colonel Greg Cook of the Canadian Forces Medical Group. Speaking at the recent annual symposium of the Society of Toxicology, Cook announced that the military has started a preventive-medicine program aimed at avoiding some of the health risks related to active duty.

Not only are environmental risks in the field being evaluated prospectively, but the military is also conducting health assessments of all recruits and tracking exposures to toxic elements throughout their careers. Individual soldiers and veterans of military service will be able to access their health information online, and the forces will make it easier for them to examine long-term outcomes of exposure to certain environmental toxins, said Cook. Previously, when little or no infor-

mation was being provided, "we were pummelled by reports in the media of soldiers in Bosnia being exposed to bauxite, which is essentially dirt," said Cook.

Military leaders now agree that it is better to try to minimize the risk of sudden exposure to natural toxins and highly potent man-made chemical, nuclear and biological weapons than to attempt to deal with the aftermath.

Prevention for the military means taking "grab samples" from the environment and having sophisticated instruments on hand so that air quality and other factors can be assessed and decisions about missions made on short notice. In recent peacekeeping missions, Canadian troops have faced environmental hazards ranging from asbestos-laden industrial buildings to exposure to toxic fumes.

But Cook is quick to point out that everything is relative when it comes to



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**Not just enemy fire: today's soldiers have to be on their guard for environmental hazards**

assessing risk in the military. "After all, we're talking about [things like] the risk of lead vapour in the air versus the risk of solid lead bullets flying past your ear."

— Susan Pinker, Montreal

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