

Atomic 'guinea pigs' set to sue

BRITISH servicemen exposed to radiation during nuclear tests in the Pacific in the 1950s are mounting a £100m compensation case against the Ministry of Defence (MoD), writes *Geraldine Hackett*.

The 900 veterans, many of whom were conscripted under national service, claim the British government used them as guinea pigs to test the impact of radiation fall-out from hydrogen bombs. They will draw on new scientific evidence, which they believe will prove that they suffered genetic disorders, inherited by their children.

Previous claims have failed, even though research has shown that one in three veterans died from bone cancer or leukaemia linked to the tests.

The new research has been conducted by Al Rowland, genetics lecturer at Massey University, New Zealand, who studied blood samples from 50 naval veterans and compared them with a control group.

His results show the presence of elevated chromosomal disturbance in white blood cells of nuclear test veterans 50 years after the event.

More than 21,000 members of the British armed forces were witness to 46 nuclear explosions over Australia and the Pacific between 1952 and 1962. Many have died while waiting for compensation from the government. Of the 900

claimants, 600 are British and the remainder from New Zealand and Fiji.

The British government has refused to accept that the then Atomic Energy Authority deliberately placed the servicemen close to the bomb detonation sites in order to study the effects of radiation.

But John Lowe, chairman of the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, who witnessed hydrogen bombs being detonated in the Malden islands in 1957, said he documented hundreds of cases of ill-health among servicemen. He was told to sit on the deck and cover his eyes with his hands until the blast was over.

The government has insisted that the servicemen were sufficiently far from the blast sites to be safe.

This weekend the MoD said the National Radiological Board had compared mortality and cancer rates among Christmas Island veterans and a control group, and found that they were similar.

Tania Baldwin, managing partner at Rosenblatt, the London law firm handling the case, said: "We have seen the preliminary results from the research in New Zealand and we are confident of a claim. When liability is established, the damages are likely to run into tens of millions and probably hundreds of millions of pounds."