

[New Syndrome Blamed for Deaths of Balkans Veterans](#)

CASUALTIES from modern warfare appear to be increasing even after the guns have cooled, with the latest mysterious illness -- Balkan Syndrome -- blamed for the deaths of Kosovo veterans.

A spokesman for Veterans Affairs Minister Bruce Scott said a handful of Australians served in the Balkans conflict, mainly officers on secondment to the United Kingdom who were unlikely to have been involved in combat.

Five Italian soldiers have reportedly died of leukaemia, seven others have cancer and a further 18 are suffering from serious illness following service in Kosovo and Bosnia. Italian authorities have launched an investigation to find out whether there is a link between the illnesses and the use of depleted uranium in armour-piercing projectiles used by the United States in 1999 NATO bombing campaigns over Kosovo.

Several countries who contributed personnel to the NATO effort have also expressed alarm. Depleted uranium rounds were also used in the Gulf War and have been linked to the mysterious illness which affected veterans of that war.

Australians serving with the multilateral forces who turned back the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait mostly avoided the problem as they were based in the Persian Gulf on board ships, Australian Defence Association executive director Michael O'Connor said. Mr O'Connor doubted the syndromes existed, saying research in the US and elsewhere on Gulf War Syndrome failed to prove the claims.

"Depleted uranium is by definition radioactively inert," Mr O'Connor said.

But some Australian Gulf War veterans had health problems that could not be attributed to other causes, Mr Scott's spokesman said.

The Federal Government had set up the Gulf War Veterans Health Study to compare the health of those who served there with an equivalent number of personnel who did not.

"We're very conscious now of the need to do a thorough check of soldiers' health before they go overseas and when they come back," he said. "We've been doing this for personnel sent to East Timor."