My Work in Spring Valley

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In an affluent section of Northwest Washington, D.C. a community is being attacked with chemical weapons. This is neither a fantasy scenario nor a description of a terrorist attack. Instead, it describes Spring Valley, the neighborhood where homes have been built on a formerly used defense site called Camp Leach. During World War I, The U.S. Army deployed scientists to this once secluded section of our nation's capital for the purpose of testing and developing poisonous chemicals to be used in the trenches of France.

The remnants of those chemicals namely Lewisite, a chlorinated organoarsenical can be found beneath the homes of Spring Valley's residents as either free product or in unexploded ordinance. Occasionally a gardener will dig up a mortar round, and be lucky if it doesn't go off. But not everyone there is lucky. While the community, the Army Corps of Engineers and various 'experts' debate the risks associated with the site, people are dying of aplastic anemia and multiple myeloma. For many reasons (none of them health-related) certain pundits want neither the residents examined nor the site cleaned up.

When the site's lead investigator requested my scientific insight, I found myself involved in something much more important than just another investigation, and doing the work became dangerous, and not just physically.

Using historical information, my health department coworker discovered numerous burial pits of chemical ordnance beneath the homes of affected families, and was forced to file for whistleblower protection when antagonists tried to have him fired from his job. I too have had to remain dedicated, in the face of threats, to what is right, and have had to struggle in my managing a simple matter of human health that has been complicated by politics beyond reason.

Indeed, after careful deliberations I had been given permission from my administration's head to start developing my second clinical trial. My goal was to create with the NIH, a cDNA microarray evaluation of certain blood cells that I feel may be overexpressing oncogenes associated with arsenic exposure. I felt strongly that we would be able identify those at risk

before they manifest clinically-evident cancers and generate an evidence-based rationale for doing what is right. Getting to that point had required me to deliberate with many parties and cast aside personal fears, but the feedback I had received throughout, especially from the community was encouraging. I believed that by applying moral courage I would be able to navigate and help resolve the situation.

The site is now considered worse than the infamous Love Canal and my need to do more resulted in my applying to St. George's University, and although I had several years earlier graduated college Magna Cum Laude with Final Honors in Biology and inducted into the Chi Beta Phi National Scientific Honorary Society, it was my work in Spring Valley that made me dedicate my life to medicine.

I'll be leaving D.C. with the knowledge that Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health has now joined our project and that a Department of Defense Area of Interest in Spring Valley has been named after me. Most importantly, I can rest assured that my completing an M.D. program at an esteemed institution like SGU will provide me with an arsenal of knowledge whose possibilities are limitless.