‘Never Volunteer for Anything’: The Concept of the ‘Volunteer’ in Human Experimentation During the Cold War

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Abstract
The Common Cold Research Unit (CCRU) and the chemical and biological research establishments, Porton Down are representative of two somewhat unique British institutions, in terms of the longevity of their research programmes and the sheer number of human participants that passed through. This article takes a closer look at the some of the institutional representations of ‘the volunteer’ and attempts to demonstrate that, historically, the term ‘volunteer’ had, by no means, a merely tacit definition. Pertinent to the academic discourse on the role of informed consent in the history of medical ethics, as well as to more recent controversy following the Coroner’s Inquest at the Old Town Hall, Trowbridge, Wiltshire, between May and November 2004 which returned a jury’s verdict of unlawfully killing of an airman, Ronald Maddison, in May 1953 who died following exposure to nerve gas, how ‘the volunteer’ was understood by scientists, subjects and policy makers in the field of human experimentation has received little scholarly attention. It is in this respect that my wider research project will attempt to bridge the gap. This article provides some preliminary discussions in relation to volunteers at both Porton Down and the CCRU in order to highlight the need for further research to contribute to a greater understanding of the precarious nature of volunteering for human experimentation in the Cold War period.

Key Words: volunteer, human experimentation, authority, Porton Down, Common Cold.

Introduction
This article aims to explore some of the definitions and interpretations of the notion of a volunteer in human experimentation during the earlier years of Cold War period, when both the chemical and biological experimental establishments at Porton Down, Salisbury, and the Common Cold Research Unit (CCRU), Salisbury, conducted long-term non-therapeutic research programmes on human subjects. The recent controversy following the Coroner’s Inquest in 2004 into the death of an airman, Ronald Maddison, who attended Porton Down in 1953 and died following exposure to nerve gas has highlighted the need for greater understanding of what it meant to be a volunteer in Britain during the Cold War, and indeed how the notion of a volunteer was understood by both experimenter and experimental subject.
within their institutional settings. It will be demonstrated that the very notion of the term ‘volunteer’ was a highly contentious dichotomy and that factors such as authority, obedience and secrecy, the latter in the case of Porton Down, played a considerable role in the institutional construction of the ‘volunteer’, which are vital to an understanding of the ambiguities of the ‘volunteer’ in Cold War human experimentation.

Comparably Unique Institutions: Porton Down and the Common Cold Research Unit

Porton Down and the CCRU, both located in Salisbury within eight miles of each other, conducted long-term programmes of experimentation using human subjects; the former research was shrouded in secrecy while the latter was very much in the public arena, with both attracting media attention from the press and television. Both programmes were non-therapeutic, that is they were not of direct or potential benefit to the participants in the way that a trial of a new drug may be potentially beneficial to someone requiring treatment for a specific illness that the drug to be tested may treat, and the longevity of the research depended upon the recruitment of people to attend as ‘human guinea-pigs’.

The chemical and biological establishments at Porton Down in Salisbury, Wiltshire, evolved initially from the Royal Engineers’ Experimental Station that was established in 1916 following the use of chlorine gas at Ypres in 1915 during the Great War, using Royal Engineers as experimental subjects. In 1929 the scope of the establishment changed, as did its title a year later from the Chemical Warfare Experimental Station to the Chemical Defence Experimental Station (CDES), widening its net to incorporate experimental subjects from all three armed services, the Royal Navy, the Royal Army and the Royal Air Force. This coincided with the United Kingdom’s ratification of the Geneva Protocol in April 1930 which condemned the use of poison gases. The United Kingdom pledged not to use gases against other signatory nations of the Protocol, but with the reservation that they could retaliate-in-kind in the event of an attack.

Meanwhile, the first biology section of Porton, the Biology Department (BDP), was founded during the Second World War under the direction of Paul Fildes who was seconded from the Medical Research Council (MRC) to Porton in 1940 to lead a team in the investigation of biological methods of warfare. The BDP was renamed the Microbiological Research Department (MRD) in 1946 and underwent a further change in title to the Microbiological Research Establishment (MRE) in 1957, before it was integrated with the chemical establishment under one title, the Chemical Defence Establishment (CDE) from 1979.

For over fifty years, Porton carried the word ‘experimental’ in its official title. But from 1970 this word was dropped, which interestingly coincided with the greater public concern for human and animal rights and the media attention which such campaigns elicited, and Porton’s attempt to defuse the negative attention by means of open days held in 1968 and 1969. Despite
the name-change, the activities of Porton in the field of human experimentation continued throughout the Cold War period, and beyond.

Service personnel provided a pool of experimental subjects, it is estimated that in excess of 20,000 men and women have passed through the gates of Porton, drawn from both the regular services and national service. National Service continued after World War Two up until 1957, owing to the United Kingdom’s ‘inescapable post-war commitments’, which provided further military personnel from which Porton could recruit; one estimate was that National Servicemen accounted for thirty percent of the overall intake of volunteers up until it was wound down. Porton’s programme of tests on service personnel through the Cold War period was called ‘The Service Volunteer Observer Scheme’ (SVOS), although precisely when this title was adopted is unclear. To use the words ‘volunteer’ and ‘observer’ in the same context appears somewhat oxymoronic as, from a present day perspective, one has passive connotations while the other implies a more active role. However, ‘to observe’ can also mean to obey, as well as having a specific scientific application in experimental procedures, so it was perhaps with these aspects of the use of the word that ‘observer’ was adopted alongside ‘volunteer’. Under the SVOS, service personnel were recruited through their units to attend Porton Down, under the command of the Military Commanding Officer and the Medical Officer for their period of attachment, which was usually for one week. Apart from the experiments, volunteers were free from military duties (fatigues), were provided with various leisure facilities and were free to leave the establishment in the evenings for the period of their time at Porton. So by comparison to the rigours and strict routine of military life, a week at Porton may have been a favourable prospect. Indeed, it was the leisure facilities of billiards, table tennis and darts, as well as a canteen, and a bar in the television lounge which provided the focus for a recruitment film produced by Porton in the 1960s. Similarly, the first director of the CCRU described the period of attendance at his institution as ‘the holidays which our volunteers enjoy’. Therefore, both institutions seemed to offer attractive incentives to potential volunteers in return for their participation in experiments.

The CCRU was housed at the Harvard Hospital, Coombe Road, Salisbury, receiving its first batch of experimental subjects in 1946. It’s history is notably less complex than that of Porton, as its research was less politically driven but rather had potential benefit to industry if a cure for the common cold could be found, therefore reducing hours of manpower lost. The Harvard Hospital was shipped over from America as a ‘gift to Britain’, arriving in prefabricated sections in 1941 and constructed on land made available by the Ministry of Health (MoH); it served as a hospital and laboratory researching into public health and emergency medicine until the war ended, when the land reverted back to the MoH.

Dr (later Sir) Christopher Andrewes was the first scientist in charge of the CCRU, accompanied by Dr Malcolm Chalmers as clinician and administrator; and he was later succeeded by Dr. David Tyrrell in the 1960s. Founded as a collaborative effort between the MRC and the MoH,
the initial work of the unit was to investigate the transmission of colds and to do this, human experimental subjects were required owing to unsatisfactory experiments with animals. In the first decade of the CCRU, its ‘main attack’ was on how to cultivate a cold and how it could be spread, with related investigations into therapies, susceptibility to cold viruses and identifying different cold virus strains; these remained central to the research of the CCRU up until its closure in 1990.

Volunteers to attend the CCRU were obtained through media publicity campaigns, with both the BBC and the Central Office of Information producing films on the CCRU in the 1960s; by 1973, 11,000 volunteers had attended the CCRU. The volunteers were required to complete an application form and the only conditions to participation were that volunteers had to be between eighteen and forty-five years of age, with no medical history of disorders of the ears and nose or pulmonary tuberculosis. Therefore the people who attended the CCRU were women and men drawn from a wide section of society with varied occupations, unlike those who attended Porton who were mostly male and all service personnel.

These institutions are useful for a comparative historical analysis because they conducted human experiments within close geographical proximity of one another, and yet the institutional settings were rather different. Claims have been made by some ex-servicemen who attended Porton that they believed they were there for common cold research, rather than the testing of chemical and biological warfare agents. Others have made no such claims while at the same time not really knowing what they were at Porton for; as one man stated, regarding his participation as a National Serviceman: ‘I volunteered as a guinea pig so I had to be guinea pigged’. How did such confusion arise? To provide any kind of answer requires further academic research into the relationship (if any existed) between the two establishments and whether there was any level of collaboration between the scientists of the institutions. To what extent the differences between the institutions, one conducting secret military research while the other being mainly civilian and in the public arena, affected the nature of human experiments and volunteers’ participation is not only an exciting, unexplored field of historical research from the British perspective, it also opens up wider issues such as the psychological impact of institutional settings and the authority of science. By taking a closer look at some uses of the word ‘volunteer’ we can better appreciate the contextual understanding of the connotations associated with volunteering and demonstrate that this needs to be unravelled for a more nuanced view.

Human Subjects: Volunteers or Volunteered?

Historically, the meaning of the word ‘volunteer’ has had a specific military context, being used to convey the voluntary enlistment of individuals into military service and such service in the military since the mid-seventeenth century. Conversely, from the mid- twentieth century the word ‘volunteer’ took on the opposite meaning, coming into common parlance to mean: ‘To assign or commit (another) to a particular undertaking, typically without his or
her consent’, similarly with reference to a military context. The continuation of National Service after the Second World War, in which compulsory military duty was required, seems to have coincided with the alternative interpretation of the ‘volunteer’. To what extent this was a factor underlying the reinterpretation cannot be known for certain, however it appears relevant in this context. The cultural connotations of the term ‘volunteer’ were firmly embedded in the military and continue to be so, yet its meanings were apparently oppositional. Moreover, understandings of the ‘volunteer’ were subject to different perceptions according to various groups at different periods in time, as will be demonstrated below.

The use of the term ‘volunteer’ in a military context, to mean an involuntary act, can be seen within an Air Ministry training film, produced in 1952, on the effects of nerve gas and protection against it. In the film Nerve Gas, actor John Slater, playing himself, is selected by a wing commander to demonstrate a nerve gas antidote self-injector. Addressing a room full of servicemen, the wing commander asks for a volunteer and when none are forthcoming he turns to Slater and states, ‘No volunteers? Sergeant Slater, you volunteer to come forward, come along’. Slater was instructed to volunteer and although the film script was no doubt written for Slater’s compliance with the wing commander, in a real situation a serviceman could not refuse an order from a senior officer without serious repercussions. So to be a volunteer, at least in the 1950s, was not necessarily the consenting act of an individual, it could also be an expectation placed upon a serviceman or woman through the order of a senior military official, and yet it was not merely a tacit definition. There is some evidence that the nature of the word ‘volunteer’ in human experimentation was open to interpretation as discernible through attempts to define more clearly its meaning, emanating in relation to both Porton Down and the MRC, who funded the CCRU.

When the CCRU was in its infancy, before it had recruited its first batch of volunteers in 1946, a MoH official wrote to the then director of the establishment, Andrewes, reiterating his view on the recruitment of potential volunteers, ‘... you already know that I am not happy about prisoners and service personnel and that I believe free volunteers are best’. The implication here was that according to the governmental line in the 1940s, prisoners and service personnel were not at liberty to offer their services as volunteers for experiments. This seems understandable in the case of prisoners, who were a captive section of society with their everyday lives under the control of the prison regime, yet we do not think of the armed services in the same context. However, the process of military training involved the conditioning of recruits to be compliant and obedient, to learn to follow orders without question and to accept that their role had a certain fatalism attached. Regular servicemen who signed up for military service did so through choice, whereas national servicemen had no choice but to complete two years compulsory service, and yet both regular and National Service demanded the same obedience. As Solly Zuckerman, Chief Scientific Advisor to the Ministry of Defence (MoD) from 1960 to 1965, succinctly
summed up, ‘Where it is the habit of the scientist to question, it is that of the soldier to obey’.  

The individual’s free will therefore is supplanted for a group rationale, and similarly to prison life, the individual’s identity is swallowed up by the need to establish conformity - uniforms are worn, routines are established and behaviour patterns are formed. Both prisons and military establishments provide institutional settings which segregate its inhabitants from society and impose a new order of obedience. These ‘total institutions’, as the sociologist Erving Goffman referred to them, removed the individuals’ autonomy and created the conditions where life was experienced ‘in the same place and under the same authority’.  

The subject of obedience to authority formed the basis of a series of experiments by psychologist Stanley Milgram, conducted from Yale University between 1960 and 1963, and resulted in a publication *Obedience to Authority* in 1974. In the experiment, a subject was put into the role of a teacher who then had to ask questions of the learner. The learner, unknown to the teacher, was an actor employed by Milgram who was connected to a probe which was seemingly attached to an electric shock generator. The teacher was told that each time the learner failed to pair words correctly, s/he should administer an electric shock, increasing in severity with each wrong answer. The experimenter’s role was to prompt the teacher in his duties, using voice commands such as ‘The experiment requires that you continue’. As Milgram noted, by denying the human element in the experiments it transcended ‘merely a human command’ and therefore the experiment took on its own imperative. The results of Milgram’s experiments, which were conducting with various modifications, showed that obedience to a perceived legitimate authority was dominant, even when the subjects believed they were administering electric shocks of 450 volts to another person. Indeed, in the experiments where the teacher could not see the learner, twenty-six out of forty administered the highest shock possible, although this figure dropped to only twelve out of forty when the teacher had to physically administer the ‘shock’.  

Milgram’s study is useful when considering the role of human subjects in experimentation because it demonstrated the power of authority, which could so readily be underestimated. As Christopher Coker, Reader in International Relations, has noted, and Milgram’s study attests, science in this period, the 1960s, appeared to possess an ‘unquestionable authority’. Moreover, Milgram asserted that society itself constructs the ‘voluntary entry into its various institutions’ because it ‘creates a sense of commitment and obligation … binding the subject to his role.’ Perhaps unwittingly, Milgram himself challenged the notion of the volunteer, by suggesting that institutions (deliberately and consciously?) constructed volunteers’ identity to ensure compliance within an institutional setting. This apparent construction of the volunteer alluded to by Milgram was an issue which arose in the proceedings of the trial of the Nazi doctors. 

While it may be less than comfortable to draw a comparison between the role of volunteers in British Cold War experiments on humans and that of
the use of human beings in the ‘medical’ experiments conducted by the Nazi doctors, it is useful to do so in order to demonstrate the particular construct of the term ‘volunteer’ and how it is possible that its definition, at least historically, has been subjected to manipulation by various groups. That is not to say that Cold War experiments on human beings in Britain should be equated with the horrific experiments conducted by the Nazi doctors, rather it was the rationale of the use of human beings as ‘volunteers’ which was put forward in the defence of the Nazi doctors in 1947 that provides an interesting perspective on the question of whether the role of the volunteer was deliberately constructed to serve a particular purpose, as suggested by Milgram.

In a questionnaire dated May 1947, compiled by Robert Servatius, defending Karl Brandt, Hitler’s physician, at the Nuremberg Doctors’ Trial, Servatius made the point that current ‘medical literature’ used ‘the term “volunteer”’ as a means of disguising the true nature of the role of human subjects, which was not necessarily a voluntary action. While Servatius’ intention was to discredit the Allies assertion that human subjects for experimentation were always volunteers who gave their informed consent, as opposed to a captive body, his observations on the meaning of the term ‘volunteer’ at least adds to an understanding of how contemporaries interpreted it, and throws open the question as to whether the notion of a ‘volunteer’ was open to abuse. Servatius’ challenge of the term suggests that there was some kind of universality in the way it was used and that if the true definition of a volunteer was a person giving informed consent as defined by the Nuremberg Trial, then this was rarely of concern to experimenters, whether German or British. Similarly the question of the validity of the ‘voluntariness’ of participants in human experiments was acknowledged in 1953 by the Ministry of Supply, who raised concerns with the recruiting of human subjects from the armed services.

Just as Servatius had questioned the validity of the voluntary nature of participants in human experiments, so government ministers raised a similar problem with the recruitment of service personnel for experiments at Porton. In an internal ministerial minute dated 1953 of the Ministry of Supply, the government department then responsible for Porton Down, the problem of recruiting servicemen to attend Porton Down was discussed, in which it was noted:

I think we should, in our administrative instructions, make it abundantly clear that the volunteering must be genuine, for any suggestion for detailing for this duty would be indefensible. If free volunteers are not forthcoming in sufficient numbers, the Ministry of Supply will have to offer more attractive terms.

This demonstrates a certain awareness of the precarious position of recruiting servicemen, trained to obey orders, as subjects for experiments, and therefore the need to ensure that they were not instructed to take part.
And yet offering ‘more attractive terms’ by which they were effectively inducing their participation, did not appear to invalidate their status as ‘genuine’. This was most likely because since 1930 all servicemen who attended Porton not only received extra leave but were also given additional pay. Volunteers who attended Porton up to 1955 received one shilling per physiological test, however this was reviewed and from 31 October 1955 the Treasury agreed to the increase of ‘additional pay’ to two shillings per test. The matter of extra pay was raised with J.C.P. Spicer of the Treasury in an earlier letter of 17 October 1955 by P.L. Burton of the War Office, in which he gave an overview of the history of the payment of ‘servicemen volunteers’. He stated that ‘because of the dangerous and unpleasant nature of the work [tests] the supply of volunteers [from the Royal Engineer staff based at Porton] gave out. It was then decided that, as an inducement, additional pay should be given’ and these were authorised at the rate of one shilling on 25th January 1924. The letter goes on to request that the amount paid for tests ‘should be doubled’ because the current rate of one shilling ‘is not such of an inducement to undergo these rather grim experiences’.

By comparison to the perspective of government officials in the 1950s, the MRC headquarters’ guidance on payment of volunteers in the 1960s followed similar lines, seeing ‘... no harm in small incentives which seem desirable in the interests of getting the volunteers to carry out effectively what you want’, and yet there was the reservation that payments should not unduly influence the subjects to participate in ‘seriously adverse conditions’ involving any ‘risk, however minimal’. Therefore while both the MRC and the MoS deemed it acceptable to pay volunteers for human experiments, the latter appeared to make no distinction between experiments that were non-invasive and those which carried an inherent risk. Indeed, the risk of harm resulting from experiments at Porton conflicted with the need to recruit more subjects, which led to a review of the station orders requesting volunteers.

In response to a letter from J.E. Gale, assistant secretary of the statistics branch of the War Office who proposed the use of civilians for tests at Porton in 1961, the then director of CDEE, Porton, E.E. Haddon, replied that it was possible to accommodate civilians and detailed the methods used to recruit from the three services by way of a table, for comparative purposes in a civilian context. Under the column heading ‘Indication of tests proposed’ the wording of notices circulated to the three services was outlined, and alongside this was another column for comments. Under the ‘Comment’ section it was noted: ‘Experience has shewn that detailed description tend to deter the Serviceman and so now very little is said.’ When numbers of service volunteers continued to decline by 1963, all references to ‘physical discomfort’ and ‘danger’ were removed from the letters circulated among the Services and replaced with ‘little or no discomfort to the individual’. A subsequent notice-board leaflet issued in 1964 by the Defence Council stated that there was ‘no danger to the individual’, even though Porton was experimenting with mind-altering chemicals such as BZ and LSD amid debates in the medical press of the safety of such substances before the addition of LSD on the Drugs (Prevention of Misuse) Act 1966. So it appears

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that the element of risk was played down in the interest of recruiting more subjects to Porton, and yet there is some evidence of an explicit understanding that recruits for Porton should be volunteers, in the sense that they were not ordered or coerced to participate.

In the 1964 Defence Council Instruction (Army) No. 37 it was stated that the individual was ‘under no obligation to take part against his wishes’ and yet military units were ‘responsible for providing volunteers’. Clearly this posed a dilemma when there appeared to be a conflict between obtaining volunteers willing to participate and at the same time placing a demand upon senior officers to obtain such volunteers. In the 1960s scientists of the Physiology Section at CDEE, Porton Down, undertook a series of psychological studies of service volunteers, which included conducting interviews before and after they participated in tests, the conclusion of which were that the volunteers interviewed were ‘more intelligent’ than civilians and service personnel but also ‘more “neurotic”’. The purpose of these studies was to assess their intelligence and personality by comparison to ‘the general civilian and Service population,’ in order that the ‘recruitment of “normal” subjects may be facilitated’.

In the first study conducted between 1960 and 1961, when interviewed two men claimed they were ‘“detailed by orders”’ and another two claimed that they had come to Porton by ‘mistake’, thinking they were attending the ‘Common Cold Research Unit’. The study rejected the claim that the men were ordered to attend Porton and asserted that despite being given the opportunity to leave, these men remained nonetheless; the response by the men who thought they were going to the CCRU was described as ‘odd, but apparently true’. The study interviewed 379 volunteers who attended Porton and recorded that these were the only four men who came to Porton under these circumstances. So it appears that these cases were in a distinct minority, however one should be aware of the circumstances in which the volunteers’ responses were recorded. Moreover, the fact that these men remained at Porton for the duration of the tests was taken as their acceptance for participation anyway.

However, in a follow-up study of the personalities of volunteers at CDEE in 1966 it was observed ‘that individuals tend to act in accordance with their perception of the group norm’, and therefore it was just as likely that the men who attended Porton ‘by mistake’ remained at Porton because that was what the majority did. After all, group behaviour and morale was what the training of service personnel was (and still is) based upon and even without deliberately exploiting this, it was an indoctrinated value all the same. This discussion highlights another more problematic issue in relation to volunteering. Within the two studies of the personalities of service volunteers at CDEE during the 1960s, there is an explicit understanding that volunteers who attended Porton were at liberty to leave once the nature of the tests were explained, but the influence of authority and group rationale upon the individual may have had a stronger effect that resulted in compliance with the tests, perhaps against the subject’s own judgement.
Towards a More Nuanced View

The intended purpose of the above discussion has been to demonstrate that the history of the volunteer in human experimentation is by no means clear-cut, as the selection of perceptions of the ‘volunteer’ from the 1940s to the 1960s above have shown. By exploring some historical perspectives of government departmental ministers, MRC headquarters personnel, scientists and legal representatives, it has hopefully raised awareness that definitions of volunteers were multifarious, rather than having any particular fixed meaning held in common by policy makers, scientists, and personnel of institutions. This further highlights the need for greater understanding of the specific institutional contexts of human experimentation and the transient nature of the term ‘volunteer’ within.

While institutional histories are not particularly ‘trendy’ in today’s research culture, in order that practices of human experimentation can be as fully understood as possible it is vital that studies focus on the specific contexts. Indeed, I would argue that how the term ‘volunteer’ was precisely understood in a particular context in a certain period of time can yield vital indications of whether informed consent precluded such a status and indeed whether or not informed consent was synonymous with volunteering for human experiments. As Jordan Goodman, Anthony McElligott and Lara Marks note, we need to move beyond the Nuremberg Code debate to ‘historicize human experimentation’. Historical accounts of institutions conducting human experiments in the twentieth century have been somewhat limited to scholars in the United States or concerned with international medical ethics guidelines and their applicability in given contexts, with little attention afforded to the subject of human experimentation in Britain by comparison.

Preliminary research suggests that military authority and the authority of science were a powerful combination at Porton Down; a precarious position which was recognised at the time, as it is hoped has been demonstrated herein. Similarly, the CCRU demonstrated an awareness of the need to use participants who attended of their own free will. However, despite the apparent risks being considerably higher at Porton Down owing to the types of substances being tested, it seems that the MRC, as the funding body of the CCRU, were far more conscious that inappropriate risks were avoided. Therefore, the specific institutional settings are crucial for a clearer understanding of the nature of volunteering for human experimentation in Cold War Britain. Through researching the institutional histories of Porton Down and the CCRU, an enhanced understanding of how significant factors such as secrecy, relationships between scientists and subjects, and the impact of authority, influenced the way in which ‘the volunteer’ was constructed can hopefully be reached.

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I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for his/ her helpful comments and suggestions. However, as always, any errors or omissions remain my responsibility.
This adage was mentioned a number of times in conversations with ex-servicemen who attended Porton Down, who asserted it’s common place in the vocabulary of the armed services. See also below, note 30.

Due to the limitations of this article and the preliminary stage of research, the focus is mainly on the 1950s and 1960s.

In May 2004 a Coroner’s Inquest was held at the Old Town Hall, Trowbridge, Wiltshire, which heard oral testimonies from ex-servicemen who attended Porton Down and expert testimonies from historians based on archive material. In November 2004 the jury returned the verdict of unlawful killing, thus overturning the original verdict, death by misadventure, at the inquest held in camera in 1953. In March 2005 the High Court ruled that the Coroner’s Inquest verdict could be challenged by the government; see for example, www.bbc.co.uk, ‘MoD can challenge Porton case’, 19 March 2005.


Carter, Chemical and Biological Defence, p. 8; for an interesting account from the perspective of the British soldiers of the chemical warfare units, known as the Special Brigade, in the First World War, see Richter, D., Chemical Soldiers (Leo Cooper, London, 1994).


The National Archives (TNA), FD1/1781, MRC Annual Report 1940-41; Paul Fildes activities at Porton, including accounts of biological warfare trials, have been fully explored in Balmer, B., Britain and Biological Warfare: Expert Advice and Science Policy, 1930-65 (Palgrave, Hampshire, 2001).

Carter, Chemical and Biological Defence, p. x-xi. Carter, Chemical and Biological Defence, p. 127-8. The MRD had also opened its doors to a chosen group of scientists in 1951, Balmer, Britain and Biological Warfare, p. 149.

Carter, Chemical and Biological Defence, p. 121; Evans puts the total at around 30,000, see Evans, R., Gassed (House of Stratus, London, 2000), Appendix 1, p. 366.


In Carter, Chemical and Biological Defence, p. 119, the word ‘observer’ is dropped and Carter gives no dates as to when this title was officially used; LHC, Gassed Collection, WO195/16136, ‘The Service Volunteer Observer Scheme at CDEE from 1959 to 1965’, a summary of the position in regards to the recruitment of service personnel dated 28 October 1965, refers to the full title as does LHC, Gassed Collection, WO195/14846, ‘History of the Service Volunteer Observer Scheme at CDEE by Wing Commander E.C.B. Bramwell, RAF’, 27 November 1959.

The term ‘observer’ is also used for reconnaissance units and those placed to watch rather than engaging in active combat. One account of the Porton Down Service Volunteer Observer Scheme, LHC, Gassed Collection, WO195/14846, ‘History of the Service Volunteer Observer Scheme by Wing Commander E.C.B. Bramwell’, 27 November 1959 refers to the service personnel who attended Porton mainly as ‘observers’, but uses both ‘volunteer’ and ‘observer’ interchangeably.


Imperial War Museum Film and Video Archives (IWM), KAY-906/42, Invitation to Porton Down, c. 1965.
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TNA, FD1/3300, Common Cold Research Unit, 10 January 1947.


Tyrrell & Fielder, *Cold Wars*, p. 83.

TNA, FD1/3300, Statement by C. Andrewes, 10 January 1947.


Tyrrell and Fielder, *Cold Wars*, p. 213.

TNA, FD 1/3300, The *Times* was one of the earliest newspapers to publicise the CCRU, running a feature in 1947 headlined ‘Volunteers for Common Cold tests, 1,200 offers of help’, 21 January 1947.

TNA, FD 9/2451, Publicity for common cold research, various dates.

TNA, FD 9/855, Volunteer’s application form.


Tyrrell & Fielder, *Cold Wars*, p. 83.

TNA, FD1/3300, The *Times* was one of the earliest newspapers to publicise the CCRU, running a feature in 1947 headlined ‘Volunteers for Common Cold tests, 1,200 offers of help’, 21 January 1947.

For an account of some of the people who attended the CCRU, see Thompson, K., *Harvard Hospital and its Volunteers: The Story of the Common Cold Research Unit* (Danny Howell Books, Wiltshire, 1991), which includes poems, anecdotes and stories.

The Coroner’s Inquest from May 2004 heard a number of oral testimonies which claimed that they went to Porton for ‘a drop up the nose’, and similar references. I attended the Inquest for a number of days during June and July 2004 when various testimonies were heard; the quote given was by an ex-National serviceman who at the time of call up was a biology student, which perhaps accounts for his rather more informed opinion on his participation in nerve gas tests.


OED On-line.

In Hockey, J., *Squaddies: Portrait of a Sub-Culture* (University of Exeter Press, Devon, 1986), a sociological study of army life, frequent references are made to volunteering. Under the sub-heading ‘Never Volunteer’, Hockey demonstrates that while ‘One of the most pervasive cliches of military life is “never volunteer for anything” … Privates will, and do, volunteer for activities they perceive to be personally advantageous …’”, p. 90.

IWM, AMY 252, Nerve Gas Training Film, December 1952.

Quoted in Tyrrell & Fielder, *Cold Wars*, p. 52.


I use this loosely to mean freedom of choice, while acknowledging that the philosophical debate surrounding free will has been raging for years. Kane, R., *The Significance of Free Will* (OUP, 1996) explores the different debates concerning the philosophical understanding of free will since 1970 and provides a useful overview. Faden, R. & Beauchamp, T., *A History and Theory of Informed Consent* (OUP, 1997) similarly explore philosophical meanings of informed consent which they align with free will.


Milgram, *Obedience*, p. 9 [my own emphasis].

Ibid.


Milgram, *Obedience*, p. 140.
For an outline of the nature of the Nazi experiments, see Taylor, T., ‘Opening Statement of the Prosecution December, 1946’, reproduced ‘as written’ in Annas, G., & Grodin, M., (Eds.), The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code, Human Rights in Human Experimentation, pp. 67-93.


The principle of informed consent was not put forward until day 104 of the Nuremberg Doctor’s Trial on 19 August 1947 when ‘ten basic principles’ were set out, now known as the Nuremberg Code, Dörner, K & Ebbinghaus, A., (Eds.), The Nuremberg Medical Trial 1946/47. Transcripts, Material of the Prosecution and Defense, Related Documents (English Edition, microfiches, K.G. Saur Verlag Munchen, Munich 2001), Fiche 123, pp.11568-9. However, informed consent formed the basis of the prosecution’s argument against the Nazi doctors throughout the Trial, see for example, Schmidt, U., Justice at Nuremberg: Leo Alexander and the Nazi Doctors’ Trial (Matthesien, Husum, 2002). For a wider debate on the Nuremberg Code see Annas, G.J., & Grodin, M.A., (Eds.), The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code, Human Rights in Human Experimentation (OUP, 1992), which brings together various academics with differing viewpoints on the applicability of the Nuremberg Code and its wider meaning in the context of human experimentation.


48 TNA, AIR 20/12171, letter to Treasury from War Office, dated 17 October 1955.

50 Ibid. This discussion also raises the issue of the contractual/moral obligation of the employee to the employer, as suggested by the description of the volunteers’ work at Porton and ‘additional pay’ they received. However it is beyond the limits of this article to explore this aspect in full, although consideration of the relationship between the government as employer and service personnel as employees is an aspect that warrants attention.

51 TNA, FD9/863, Letter from J.G. Duncan, MRC Headquarters, to P. Medawar, National Institute for Medical Research, 26 September 1967.

52 LHC, Gassed Collection, WO 32/20843, Letter from Haddon to Gale, 17 August 1961.

53 Ibid., Table attached to letter from Haddon to Gale.


56 Even proponents of the psychiatric benefits of LSD warned that it had potential dangers if the person taking it did not know it had been administered, for example Cohen, S., ‘Lysergic Acid Diethylamide [LSD]: Side Effects and Complications’, Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases (1960), Vol. 130, pp. 30-40. For accounts of the history of LSD as a recreational drug and its use in military experiments in the USA and Britain, see Lee, M.A., & Shlain, B., Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD (Grove Press, NY, 1985); Black, D., Acid: The Secret History of LSD (Vision, London, 1998); also ch. 8, ‘Britain’s Psychedelic Soldiers’ in Evans, Gassed, pp. 231-260.


LHC, Gassed Collection, WO 189/167, Further studies of the service volunteer at CDEE, 23 March 1966.
Ibid. The study indeed recognised that ‘Because of the operational importance of group behaviour, the development of techniques to assess group morale would therefore seem to be an important field of research.’
For an interesting collection of essays exploring issues relating to the Nuremberg Code, probably the most well-known and hotly debated medical ethics code, see Annas, and Grodin, (Eds.), The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code, Human Rights in Human Experimentation. More specifically, for a recent account of the role of Leo Alexander, US advisor in the Nazi doctors’ trial, see Schmidt, U., Justice at Nuremberg: Leo Alexander and the Nazi Doctors’ Trial.
One of the few articles on this subject, Hazelgrove, J., ‘Human Experimentation Ethics in Britain, 146-73’, Social History of Medicine, 2002, Vol. 39, No. 1, provides an excellent overview of the situation in Britain in relation to the medical profession’s resistance to an adherence to medical ethics codes, preferring instead the power of their own autonomy. Also, see Goodman, McElligott, & Marks, (Eds.), Useful Bodies, especially Balmer, B., ‘Using the Population Body to Protect the National Body: Germ Warfare Tests in the United Kingdom after World War II’ and Stanton, J., “I Have Been on Tenterhooks”: Wartime Medical Research Council Jaundice Committee Experiments.”