

Dstl Secretariat

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Ministry of Defence

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Our ref: FOI 2018/041111

Your ref:

Date: 11 April 2018

Dear 

Thank you for your email of 9 March 2018 requesting the following information:

*"Please disclose the number of accidents and or security breaches involving biological agents, nerve agents, gases or any other lethal chemicals at Porton Down from January 2014 to date;*

*"Please provide a breakdown showing: \* the date and description of each incident \* which nerve, biological agent, gas or chemical was involved \* whether any injuries occurred and the nature of the injuries \* what action was taken \* who investigated and a brief description of the findings"*

*"Please disclose whether any staff were disciplined over any of the incidents and, if so, the nature of the action taken"*

We are treating your correspondence as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

A search for the information has now been completed within the Ministry of Defence, and we can confirm that all the information in scope of your request is held.

The information you have requested can be found, below, but some of the information falls entirely within the scope of the absolute exemptions provided for at section 40 (Personal Data) and qualified exemptions provided for at sections 24 (National Security) and 27 (International Relations) of the FOIA and has been withheld.

Section 40(2) has been applied to some of the information in order to protect personal information as governed by the Data Protection Act 1998. Section 40 is an absolute exemption and there is therefore no requirement to consider the public interest in making a decision to withhold the information.

Section 24 and 27 are qualified exemptions and are subject to public interest testing which means that the information requested can only be withheld if the public interest in doing so outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

Section 24 (1) has been applied to some of the information because it contains details which are operationally sensitive and would prejudice the capability and effectiveness of our armed forces. The balance of public interest was found to be in favour of withholding the information given that, overall, the public interest is best served in not releasing any details on the nerve agent, biological agent, gas or chemical. For these reasons we have set the level of prejudice against release of the exempted information at the higher level of “would” rather than “would be likely to”.

Section 27(1)(a) has been applied because some of the information has the potential to adversely affect relations with our allies. The balance of the public interest test concluded that whilst release would increase public understanding and confidence with regard to the relationships the United Kingdom has with other international states the balance of the public interest lay in withholding this information you desire. We have considered it necessary to apply the higher level of prejudice against release of the exempted information at the higher level of “would” rather than “would be likely to”.

The information you have requested can be found below:

### Accidents or security breaches

The following data is for the period 1 January 2015 to 20 March 2018. The events were reported via the Dstl process for incidents, which assesses the severity of the incident and applies an investigation process proportional to this severity, resulting in corrective actions being applied.

We can confirm there have been no security breaches involving biological agents, nerve agents, gases or any other lethal chemicals at Porton Down from January 2014 to date.

We can confirm that no disciplinary action was taken as a result of the incidents listed below.

Category	Period	Description
Chemical	Apr 2015	At the end of an activity, a member of staff was exposed to a trace level of a chemical causing some coughing and sneezing. The levels were substantially below a level that could cause lasting harm or ill health. Staff were retrained, processes revised and occupational hygiene activities increased.
Chemical	Sep 2015	A contractor was working on the roof of a building when he felt unwell. The person was checked by the on-site occupational health doctor and allowed to return to work. Dstl occupational hygiene conducted monitoring at roof level and could not identify anything that could have been responsible. No harm occurred as a result of this occurrence.
Chemical	Nov 2015	A glass container containing a small amount of a chemical caused a small cut to the hand of a member of staff during handling. First aid was administered and no lasting harm occurred. Staff were retrained and processes revised.
Chemical	Apr 2016	Delivery of a chemical was placed in alternative, approved, storage facilities prior to storage in the usual storage area. Authorised engineer accessed the alternative store during routine calibration activities. No harm occurred as a result of this occurrence and the chemical was placed into another storage area to allow the calibration activities to complete.
Chemical	July 2017	Routine biological monitoring identified that a member of staff had been exposed to a low level of chemical during the course of their experimental work. The exposure was localised and no clinical signs of ill health were observed. The process and the associated risk controls were reviewed and strengthened.
Chemical	Nov 2017	During a fumigation process an error with the extraction process caused a staff member to detect exposure to a small quantity of chemical. The staff member exited the room and subsequently attended Occupational Health. The fumigation process and the associated risk controls were reviewed and strengthened. No signs of ill health were observed.

Category	Period	Description
Chemical	Feb 2018	Symptoms of irritation identified after completing a process involving irritant products. Controls reviewed and improved in the short term for housekeeping, PPE and work instructions. The levels were substantially below a level that could cause lasting harm or ill health.
Chemical	Mar 2018	Symptoms of irritation following the observation of a process involving irritant products. Controls reviewed and improved in the short term for housekeeping, PPE and work instructions. The levels were substantially below a level that could cause lasting harm or ill health.

If you are not satisfied with this response or you wish to complain about any aspect of the handling of your request, then you may apply for an independent internal review by contacting the Information Rights Compliance team, 1st Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB (e-mail CIO-FOI-IR@mod.uk). Please note that any request for an internal review must be made within 40 working days of the date on which the attempt to reach informal resolution has come to an end.

If you remain dissatisfied following an internal review, you may take your complaint to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website, <http://www.ico.gov.uk>.

Yours sincerely

Dstl Secretariat