**Podcast: Substance Use Disorders in the Veteran Population**

**INTRO:** Hello, I'm Erica Sprey. Welcome to our ongoing podcast series "Voices of VA Research." I am speaking with Dr. Keith Humphreys, associate director for the HSR&D Center for Innovation to Implementation in Palo Alto, California. Dr. Humphreys is considered a national expert on substance use disorders. In addition to being a VA Senior Research Career Scientist Awardee, he has also served as senior policy adviser for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.

Dr. Humphreys is the principle investigator for a [CREATE](http://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/centers/create/) initiative which is a group of four grants that will study care innovations for substance use disorders in the VA. We spoke with Dr. Humphreys to talk about the history of substance use disorders in the Veteran population, and how that differs from the non-veteran population.

**Sprey: Welcome Dr. Humphreys. Can you tell us about the overall prevalence of substance use disorders in the Veteran population?**

**Humphreys**: So for Veterans as a whole, not just those who use the VA health system, we know a couple things about them. About one in five smoke tobacco, which is more than the general population. About 22.6 percent binged on alcohol use in the last month, which means they sat down and drank five or more drinks at a sitting. About 7.5 percent are heavy alcohol users, meaning in the last month alone, they drank five or more drinks at a sitting, at least five times. And about 4.5 percent used illicit drugs in the last month. All of those things are higher than you would see in a comparable group of non-Veterans. If you match a non-Veteran population by gender and age, Vets do seem to use more substances.

When you look at the VA health system using population, that's even more the case. In our patients, substance use, tobacco, alcohol, cocaine, heroin, lately oxycontin and things like that, are one of the most common and costly chronic conditions that we face in the health care system.

**Sprey: Are Veterans with chronic illness at greater risk for substance use disorders, or do Veterans with substance use disorders tend to become sicker?**

**Humphreys:** Both things are probably true. It's also true that the severity of substance use disorders, the course of them is often connected to how much social capital people have. So people who have more education, better jobs, better marriages, and better income are more likely to have a good outcome from treatment. If you think of Veterans as a whole, selection into the VA, we are a safety net provider, we serve a lot of people who have fewer of those things. And that would include people who have been treated many times, and relapsed many times. They have very challenging lives.

**Sprey: Do substance use disorders vary for Veterans who have served overseas in different campaigns, like Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan?**

**Humphreys:** Yes, each cohort has had its own experiences with substances. If you go back to World War II, Korean War era Vets, alcohol overwhelmingly dominates. If you look at the Southeast Asia, Vietnam, I would say there were huge in-theater exposures to opiates and cannabis. Particularly opiates. There was very pure, very cheap heroin in Vietnam. That’s where a lot of the drug treatment concern came about in the U.S. in the 1970s, was the Veterans who were addicted to heroin in Southeast Asia.

In the more recent conflicts, I should say I've been to Iraq, there wasn't a lot of exposure to illicit drugs (at least in the early years) because Iraq was a very conservative society and had militarized borders. But there are a lot of pharmaceuticals loose in Iraq, and that includes leakage out of the very corrupt Iraqi pharmaceutical system, but also from prescribed prescriptions from Army doctors. Soldiers are getting more potent opioids than they've ever had before. And sometimes they desperately need them; I'm not saying it's wrong. But when you get a serious injury and are prescribed a lot of opioids in your transition out of the service, you are at risk of having an enduring problem. So a lot of the young guys and gals are far more likely to have a prescription drug problem, which makes them different than what VA has seen in the past with the Vietnam, Korea, and World War II Veterans.

**Sprey: Do rates of substance use disorders in Veterans vary by gender?**

**Humphreys:** If you look at the world, men use more substances than women. That's true for every place on earth. It's true in the United States. So given that the military has more men, you are going to have a lot more substance use, especially among young men. But one of the interesting things is that while male Veterans use more substances than male non-Veterans, the difference between female Veterans and female non-Veterans is even higher.

So when you look at the Vietnam data, the rate of alcohol dependence among women who served in Vietnam was something like five times higher than women who didn't. And the differences for men weren't that big. So we might see more substance abuse in women Veterans relative to women in general. So even if most Veterans are male, the women who have served and are coming in [for treatment at VA] are a lot more likely to have trouble than our women outside. And so that is something unique to their gender, relative to the men, where men are somewhat more likely [to have substance abuse problems].