

A National Newsletter for Veterans and their Health Care Providers

WRIISC *Advantage*

FALL 2022

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Research on Gulf War Illness**

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WRIISC CELEBRATES THE PASSAGE OF THE SERGEANT FIRST CLASS (SFC) HEATH ROBINSON HONORING OUR PROMISE TO ADDRESS COMPREHENSIVE TOXICS (PACT) ACT OF 2022!

This edition of WRIISC Advantage includes the latest information on VA's Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry (AHOBPR), important research updates for Gulf War Veterans and much more...

DIRECTORS' CORNER

WRIISC recognizes the significance of the Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act for hundreds of thousands of Veterans nationwide. Specifically, as part of VA's Health Outcomes Military Exposures (HOME), WRIISC is working on the many relevant sections of the legislation that address military exposure aspects of the PACT Act within the Veteran's Health Administration (VHA). For example, WRIISC-HOME has recently implemented national mandatory VA provider training for evaluation of military exposures by completion of a WRIISC education module. Additionally, WRIISC facilities work to establish specialty centers dedicated to focusing on Veterans unique environmental exposure concerns (see details below in Around the WRIISC News). **WRIISC is honored to continue to ensure that the VA system of care will provide the highest quality health services for Veterans with exposure concerns.**

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Helena Chandler, PhD
Director, NJ WRIISC

Matt Reinhard, PsyD
Director, DC WRIISC

For more information about the **Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act**:
www.va.gov/PACT

VA's Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry - An Update

IN 2014 THE VA established the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry (AHOBPR) in response to Veterans growing concerns about health effects related to exposure to airborne hazards and burn pits during deployment. In present day, the AHOBPR continues to grow and to provide a foundation for research and education related to these exposures. Daily operations for the Registry were transitioned to the VA Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE) located at the NJ WRIISC facility in 2021. (Read more about the AHBPCE in "Around the WRIISC News"). VA's AHOBPR includes two parts – an online questionnaire and a free, optional health evaluation. The questionnaire asks about a Veteran's deployment, health history, lifestyle and other factors. The health evaluation may be completed by a primary care provider at the Veteran's local VA medical facility, an environmental health clinician at special environmental hazard clinics or remotely via a telehealth appointment. By joining the AHOBPR, Veterans can provide information that supports ongoing research and surveillance, receive

assistance in identifying potential health concerns, discuss concerns with their providers and get follow-up care.

CLINICIANS AT THE AHBPCE and associated Post-Deployment Cardiopulmonary Evaluation Network sites (PDCEN) also screen the AHOBPR to identify Veterans with specific reports of respiratory health concerns. Selected Veterans are then invited to complete a specialized clinical assessment in order to assess any respiratory or related conditions which the Veteran is experiencing, assess previous evaluations and confirm diagnoses if present, determine if the conditions are related to deployment, and provide recommendations to the Veteran and their providers to identify treatments and/or follow-up care to improve their health. Findings from specialized assessments and recommendations are provided to the Veteran and their primary care provider for any follow-up management and care. VA utilizes the knowledge gained through the AHOBPR to guide future research efforts and develop best practices to be

disseminated throughout the broader healthcare community. (More information about AHBPC including a website link is listed below.)

A TOTAL OF 327,626 Veterans and service members have joined the registry as of Aug. 17, 2022, and this number continues to increase. The registry is for those who were deployed to the Southwest Asia theater of operations in Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, waters of the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, or Red Sea any time after August 2, 1990; or Afghanistan or Djibouti on or after September 11, 2001. In

addition, eligibility now includes service in Syria or Uzbekistan since September 11, 2001, or Egypt since August 1990. The VA has also taken steps to make the Registry more user friendly and easier to navigate. Please note: The registry is separate from the VA disability compensation process and is not required to file a claim.

WRIISC encourages all eligible Veterans to participate in the registry.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS REGISTRY, INCLUDING ELIGIBILITY AND HOW VETERANS CAN SIGN UP VISIT:

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp>

WRIISC's Collaborative Research on Gulf War Illness

RESEARCH IS OFTEN BEST informed by having collaborations from a diverse set of individuals who are experts in a topic and those often include colleagues throughout VA, other government agencies, academic affiliations, and others. One important area of research where collaboration has been critical is Gulf War Illness (GWI). The major features of GWI are commonly understood as pain, chronic fatigue, cognitive problems, and irritable bowel syndrome, though there is no universally accepted definition. While similar conditions are observed in other deployments, GWI was initially associated with deployment to the Persian Gulf region in 1990 – 1991. In that group, approximately 1/3rd of those deployed meet criteria for GWI with both higher and lower estimates depending on the definition used. Similar conditions are seen following other deployments, including in Veterans who deployed at later times. The WRIISC has evaluated many Veterans with GWI, led several research projects trying to understand this condition and helped the Veterans manage the symptoms. A couple of ongoing external collaborations are highlighted here.

WRIISC SITES HAVE COORDINATED research projects with each other and outside research collaborators to take a closer look at the causes of GWI including the VA ORD funded Project In-Depth (VA-NIH Investigative Deep Phenotyping of Gulf War Veteran Health) led by the DC WRIISC in collaboration with the National Institutes of Health that aims to provide an improved understanding

of GWI pathobiology. The Gulf War Illness Clinical Trials and Intervention Consortium (GWICTIC) coordinated by Nova Southeastern University in partnership with the CA and NJ WRIISCs, aims to test possible treatment options for veterans with GWI symptoms. Being able to work together with outside organizations and between sites allows for new angles and perspectives in targeting high-priority issues of many of the Gulf War Veterans we evaluate. Stay tuned to hear about findings and developments made through these important projects that will ultimately lead to better clinical care for Veterans with GWI. GWICTIC is currently looking for Veterans who served in Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield that are interested in participating in research across the country including Palo Alto, CA and East Orange, NJ WRIISC sites. For more information about our trials please call or email us at 954-262-2870 or GWICTIC@nova.edu!



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Stay tuned to hear about findings and developments made through these important projects that will ultimately lead to better clinical care for Veterans with GWI!

Highlighting WRIISC's Collaborations

Partnering with individuals and teams across the VA, Department of Defense (DoD), and other federal agencies as well as universities and research foundations is critical to advancing Veteran's health.

COLLABORATIONS WITH OUTSIDE ORGANIZATIONS compliment all of the work completed at the WRIISC. The recently passed VA PACT Act highlighted that more needs to be done to support our nation's honorable Veterans who may have been subjected to potentially harmful environmental exposures during deployment. Several initiatives are underway at the WRIISC that involve a high level of teamwork with outside organizations. Many of these initiatives are geared towards better equipping Veteran providers with the tools needed to effectively respond to and address these exposure concerns.

BEGINNING IN 2014, WRIISC-HOME'S expertise in environmental exposure led to the development of a comprehensive curriculum to teach Veteran providers how to effectively diagnose and manage the often medically unexplained and difficult to diagnose exposure-related health concerns.

MORE RECENTLY, WRIISC-HOME HAS created multiple relationships with other VA and non-VA organizations to further reach both VA and Community Providers with the vital information included in this curriculum. Highlights include the VA Secretary mandating completion of WRIISC's Module 1- Assessing Deployment Related Environmental

Exposures by all Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) clinicians. Additionally, HOME mandated that all Environmental Health Clinicians and Coordinators who specialize in environmental exposure complete the entire curriculum consisting of WRIISC's five (5) military exposure E-learning Modules.



THIS PAST APRIL THE VA also partnered with the American College of Preventive Medicine (ACPM) to offer Level 1 and soon, Level 2 Certifications in Military Environmental Exposures. These certifications offer current and future Veteran health care providers, plus medical students and residents, the skills and knowledge needed to effectively evaluate Veterans with post-deployment exposure concerns. (See the back cover of this newsletter for more information.)

AND FINALLY, IN SUPPORT of ensuring VISN 2 Primary Care provider leadership in caring for post-deployed Veterans, NJ WRIISC is currently completing advance negotiations to ensure all providers within its VISN complete its remaining 4-military exposure modules and obtain both ACPM's Level 1 and 2 Certifications.

Without the assistance of external organizations, several of our efforts to better prepare those on the front lines of caring for Veterans would not have been possible. We thank each individual and organization who played a role!

Research Matters

WRIISC continues to conduct research that relates to Veterans' health. Below is a study conducted by the WRIISC research team.

PUBLICATION TITLE:

"She thought the same way I thought:" a qualitative study of patient-provider concordance among Gulf War Veterans with Gulf War Illness.

QUESTION: What aspects of the Veteran-provider relationship contribute to and detract from concordance (i.e., shared understanding between Veteran and provider about illness causes, course, and treatment) from the perspective of Veterans with GWI?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: Study was conducted at all three WRIISCs. Primary Author: Lesnewich, L.

FINDINGS:

Qualitative interviews revealed that the major themes associated with Veteran-provider concordance included validation of Veterans' illness experience, Veterans' perception of provider expertise in GWI, and Veterans' trust in their providers. Invalidation, low provider expertise, and distrust detracted from Veteran-provider concordance.

MEANING: These findings suggest VA providers can foster concordance by legitimizing Veterans' experiences, communicating knowledge about GWI, and establishing trust.



COMPREHENSIVE VIRTUAL HEALTH COACHING PROGRAM FOR CHRONIC MULTI-SYMTOM ILLNESSES



VETERANS EVALUATED AT THE WRIISC often have difficult to treat symptoms including fatigue, pain, cognitive issues, gastrointestinal problems, respiratory issues, neurologic symptoms, and sleep difficulties. These difficult-to diagnose and treat chronic health concerns are linked to increased mental health needs, suicide risk, decreased functioning, and poor quality of life. The VA has adopted a Whole Health approach to health care with a goal to both empower and equip Veterans to actively engage and take charge of their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being to improve their overall health and quality of life.

TO SERVE THE NEEDS OF these Veterans during a time when access to care became more challenging due to the COVID pandemic, and as part of a clinical process improvement (non-research) program, the WRIISC (NJ), in collaboration with the Wellness Solutions Group – a Service- disabled Veteran organization, developed a virtual Comprehensive Health Coaching Program. The six-month video telehealth program included individual and group nutrition, adaptive exercise coaching, group mindfulness meditation and yoga, nutritional supplements and functional medicine assessments that were tailored to each Veteran.

THE FIRST COHORT OF 11 Veterans with deployment-related chronic multi-symptom illness (CMI) completed the program. The group and individual sessions were delivered virtually using video telehealth. Attendance for all sessions (group and individual health coaching, exercise, nutrition, education, and mindfulness/yoga) was excellent with Veterans attending 70-100% of offered sessions. Nine veterans completed assessments before and after the program.

Overall, by the end of the program the group had:

- Decreases in medical symptoms
- Decreases in anxiety and depression
- Improvements in functional movement

- Combined weight loss of 237lbs, with individual veterans losing between 12 to 55lbs.

Many Veterans also reported improvements in energy, activity tolerance, ability to cope with physical pain, quality of life and expressed greater hope for the future.

PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THE FOLLOWING

- ✓ Ability to do physical work again after previously needing to pay others to do it.
- ✓ Reducing the total number of medications taken for various conditions and getting off all pain medications.
- ✓ Intentional weight gain after a decade of digestive health issues and being underweight.
- ✓ Ability to leave the house/travel after years of gut health issues that kept them home bound.
- ✓ Gratitude for working with a coach who was a service-disabled veteran and another coach who was a Veteran caregiver. They understood and could relate to what the Veterans were going through.

OVERALL, THE COMPREHENSIVE VIRTUAL HEALTH Coaching Program was well received by Veterans and led to numerous improvements in physical and emotional functioning. These early successes illustrate an opportunity for the WRIISC to provide individualized, innovative solutions for the evaluation and treatment of Veterans with difficult to treat, complex deployment-related chronic multi-symptoms illnesses.

This clinical initiative was led by Dr. Omowunmi Osinubi and the clinical staff at the NJ site. It was facilitated by health coaching experience at all WRIISC sites, collaboration with colleagues at other VA sites, and contracted partners.

Around the WRIISC News

CA WRIISC

Women's Operational and Military Exposure Network (WRIISC-WOMEN)

THE CA WRIISC is pleased to announce the formation of the Women's Operational and Military Exposure Network (WRIISC-WOMEN). The Network will study the effects that deployment exposures have on women and will follow the WRIISC's model of advancing post-deployment healthcare through clinical assessment, educational offerings and novel research.



The WRIISC-WOMEN clinical team will coordinate a multi-symptom assessment and provide diagnostic and treatment recommendations that cross a wide spectrum of symptoms and body systems. By coordinating assessment across specialties, WRIISC-WOMEN

will be able to address the totality of the woman Veteran's concerns and improve their lives in a comprehensive way.

The WRIISC WOMEN research team will study the epidemiology of military exposures and its effects on women Veterans. Based upon the epidemiology, the team will then advance the study to the effectiveness of treatments and rehabilitation. Finally, WRIISC-WOMEN will provide focused educational resources to healthcare providers (VA and non-VA) as well as Veterans and their families.

WRIISC-WOMEN will work collaboratively on Veteran deployment health concerns with the Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE) and the Complex Exposure Threats Center (CETC) and other VA, DoD and academic partners.

DC WRIISC

Complex Exposure Threats Center (CETC)

THE DC WRIISC has historically provided specialized care and a comprehensive interdisciplinary evaluation for Veterans with poorly understood military deployment exposures (e.g., environmental hazards and repeated blast exposure) and uncertain health outcomes (e.g. Gulf War Illness). Building on this expertise, the mission of a newly developed Complex Exposure Threats Center (CETC) will be to evaluate and study the full scope of complex exposures with unknown resulting health effects and take a closer look at how the use of new technologies (e.g., directed energy) contribute to these.

The new Center will allow for a network of exposure specialists to collect, integrate, and analyze information from a variety of sources. CETC exposure experts will maintain strong connections and collaborations within the DoD and multiple outside institutions. These will enable and facilitate the Center's ability to evaluate and treat exposure concerns reported by government and military personnel in both federal and academic partnerships under VA leadership.

Using a special framework to integrate all information learned, CETC will offer the best options for evaluation and intervention for those affected by new injuries or undefined conditions. This approach will allow CETC to quickly combine and review knowledge to inform both policy and evidence-based clinical care for individuals affected by emerging environmental exposure concerns.

As mentioned in CA's "Around the WRIISC News", each of our deployment health centers works collectively and with other organizations to optimally address health concerns of deployed Veterans.

WRIISC SERVICE MEMBERS - A LOOK BACK



Ansgar Furst, PhD, Allied German Air Force, 1989-1991, Researcher, CA



Vincent Torres, U.S. Marine Corps, 1994-1998, Administration, CA



Melissa McSwain, MS, U.S. Navy, 1993-2003, Research Coordinator, NJ



Steven Greer, MS, EP-C, U.S. Army/Army Reserve, 1999-2007, Health Science Specialist/Exercise Physiologist, NJ

NJ WRIISC

Airborne Hazards Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE)



THE AIRBORNE HAZARDS AND BURN PITS CENTER OF EXCELLENCE (AHBPCE)

conducts research on airborne hazards and burn pits and their possible health effects, including respiratory concerns, unexplained shortness of breath (dyspnea), and other health outcomes. The AHBPCE stems from NJ WRIISC's past work. Researchers initially conducted Pulmonary Function Tests but then determined that this test may not always be enough to completely evaluate Veterans. They expanded evaluations to include more in-depth testing, such as cardiopulmonary exercise testing, high-resolution CT scans, and ENT evaluations. These offerings led to the designation as the Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence on May 2, 2019. The goals of the AHBPCE include establishing best practices, developing standardized evaluations, conducting research, and providing education and outreach.

A VETERAN'S FEEDBACK FROM THE AHBPCE CLINICAL EVALUATION WAS HIGHLIGHTED IN A RECENT VA VANTAGE POINT BLOG. AFTER A MULTIDISCIPLINARY CLINICAL REVIEW AND WITH THE HELP OF AN EFFECTIVE TREATMENT PLAN, THE VETERAN REPORTS HIS HEALTH HAS IMPROVED.

FOR THE FULL STORY VISIT: <https://news.va.gov/104959/teams-working-to-care-for-veterans-exposed-to-burn-pits/>

In July 2019, the AHBPCE established Post Deployment Cardiopulmonary Evaluation Network (PDCEN) sites across the country to increase access to specialized cardiopulmonary evaluations for Veterans and to be able to create and discuss Veterans' health risks and care plans.

AHBPCE is utilizing the VA's AHOBPR to reach Veterans for clinical evaluation within the Post Deployment Cardiopulmonary Evaluation Network (PDCEN), identify potential participants for clinical research studies and identify trends and patterns across participants.

Giving Veterans only the best care involves a combined effort between all of our deployment health centers and external collaborators.

LEARN MORE ABOUT AHBPCE:

[https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/](https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/AHBPCE/index.asp)

[WARRELATEDILLNESS/AHBPCE/index.asp](https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/AHBPCE/index.asp)

AIRBORNE HAZARDS AND BURN PITS
CENTER OF EXCELLENCE



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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
 Veterans Health Administration



This newsletter contains a minimum of 30% post-consumer waste.

WRIISC partnered with the American College of Preventative Medicine (ACPM) to develop a certification program!

Attention Providers:

Interested in learning about Veteran military exposure concerns?

Obtain a Level 1 certification and continuing medical education credits upon successful completion of WRIISCs 5 E-learning modules comprehensive exam.



AMA certification program:

[Military Environmental Exposures Certification | ACPM](#)

