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Official Urges Gulf War Vets to Seek VA Care

Lisa Daniel | American Forces Press Release

April 22, 2010

Gulf War veterans with medical symptoms should seek treatment through the Department of Veterans Affairs in light of a recent study that says Gulf War service is a cause of post-traumatic stress disorder, a senior Military Health System official said yesterday.

In an interview, Dr. Michael Kilpatrick, director of strategic communications for the Military Health System, said that if Gulf War veterans seek care through VA, rather than private doctors, researchers can continue to track their data and search for causes of their symptoms.

Congress has ordered that Gulf War veterans still qualify for high-priority care through the VA, and Kilpatrick urged them to use it.



"For Gulf War veterans who think they may have symptoms and they are undiagnosed, we still encourage them to seek care," he said.

The National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine found in its most recent study on the health effects of the Gulf War, released April 9, that military service in the war is a cause of post-traumatic stress disorder in some veterans and also is associated with multiple other medical symptoms.

The VA-funded study said researchers found sufficient evidence that service in the Gulf caused PTSD. The study did not find a cause-and-effect relationship between a host of other illnesses found in the veterans, but acknowledged sufficient evidence of an association between their service and other psychiatric disorders such as anxiety and substance abuse and gastrointestinal problems.

The study found "limited evidence" of an association between Gulf service and ALS -- a disease of the nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord also known as Lou Gehrig's disease -- as well as a widespread pain condition called fibromyalgia and sexual difficulties.

The study found insufficient evidence to link Gulf service to any cancers, blood diseases, respiratory illness, multiple sclerosis, neurological disorders, cardiovascular disease and other ailments. The study found no evidence of a link between Gulf War service and peripheral neuropathy and decreased lung function and heart disease deaths in the first 10 years after the war.

Kilpatrick said the findings do not change the Military Health System's approach to treating the symptoms of Gulf War veterans without knowing the causes.

"From the [Defense Department] standpoint, we've always believed that Gulf War veterans' symptoms were real," Kilpatrick said. "Not knowing the cause didn't make them not real. They are deserving of treatment for their symptoms and, medically, we frequently treat symptoms without knowing the reason for the symptoms."

Many factors complicate knowing the cause of the veterans' symptoms, which may never be determined, Kilpatrick said, echoing the comments of Institute of Medicine officials.

The United States sent nearly 700,000 servicemembers to the Persian Gulf between August 1990 and July 1991. Of those, 147 were killed in combat and 233 died from noncombat causes. More than 250,000 "suffer from persistent, unexplained symptoms," the institute said in its release of the report.

Kilpatrick noted other factors that complicated research. Combat operations lasted only 100 days, and many Gulf War veterans left service before their symptoms appeared. Also, little was known about PTSD in the early 1990s, there were no pre- or post-deployment health exams, and no electronic records.

"There are a lot of nuances that are hard for people to understand," he said. "Our biggest difficulty when we're looking at

700,000 people is to say, 'What is the cause?' Was it the deployment, the combat, or something not related to their combat life?

"We're working hard today, starting with new recruits, to understand that."

Kilpatrick called the institute's research methods "the gold standard," and said the department strongly supports its suggestion for more study of what has become known as Gulf War Illness.

"We continue to focus on the health of Gulf War veterans and we owe a lot to them today for their self protection and readiness to protect today's forces," he said. "The health of individuals as they deploy is extremely important to us and we want to know that they are as healthy when they come home as when they left."

The military continues to learn from the health experiences of Gulf War veterans and then apply that knowledge to today's troops, Kilpatrick added.

"There are many medical lessons learned from the Gulf War," Kilpatrick said. "We've learned a lot about deployment and its effect on individuals."