



Federal Health Matters

Nerve Agent Linked to Brain Cancer

A study published in the August issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* has found an increase in brain cancer deaths among Gulf War veterans who might have been exposed to the nerve agent sarin following the demolition of two ammunition caches in Khamisiyah, Iraq in March 1991. The study was commissioned by the DoD and conducted by investigators from the VA and the Institute of Medicine (IOM).

According to Michael Kilpatrick, deputy director of the DoD's Deployment Health Support Directorate, the military didn't know at the time of the operations that the Iraqi munitions contained sarin. Once United Nations inspectors discovered that some of the weapons contained sarin, the DoD contacted about 300,000 veterans who had been in or near the affected areas.

Using a DoD plume model, the study investigators estimated that approximately 100,000 soldiers might have been exposed to the nerve agent as a result of the demolitions. They then compared cause-specific mortality data from 1991 through 2000 among these soldiers to that of about 200,000 others who were not believed to have been exposed. The results showed that, while rates for most causes of

death did not differ between the groups, death from brain cancer was about twice as common in potentially exposed soldiers than in unexposed soldiers (25 per 100,000 versus 12 per 100,000, respectively). Additionally, the risk of brain cancer death was greater for those exposed to sarin for two or more days than for those exposed for only one day.

Although William Page, PhD, director of the study and a senior program officer at the IOM, acknowledges the significance of a doubling of brain cancer death, he points out that "it's still a pretty small risk" and adds that the study doesn't address causality. While sarin is known to cause convulsions and death, it has not yet been proven to be a carcinogen. Page recommends that further long-term studies be conducted to follow up with these veterans and monitor any changes in their risk of brain cancer over time.

VA Reviewing PTSD Disability Claims

The VA has announced that, starting this month, it will be reviewing 72,000 posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) disability claims that were approved between 1999 and 2004 in order to reassess whether the approvals were backed by sufficient evidence. The review applies to cases in which full benefits were

granted for PTSD—either alone or in combination with other conditions—and will affect approximately one third of all veterans who currently receive disability payments for PTSD.

It was prompted, the VA explained, by the results of an internal study, which revealed inconsistencies in PTSD claims decisions. Specifically, investigators found that some cases lacked

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required evidence of a military-related stressor that triggered the PTSD. "Some disabilities are inherently prone to subjective rating decisions, especially conditions such as PTSD where much of the information needed to make a rating decision is not physically apparent," stated VA Inspector General Richard Griffin. "This subjectivity leads to inconsistency."

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Continued on page 38

FEDERAL HEALTH MATTERS

Continued from page 31

Veterans of the recent combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq account for 10% of the increase in PTSD disability.

If, in the course of the review, the VA finds that records for a veteran's PTSD claim don't detail a military-related stressor, the veteran will be asked to provide more information. But this may not always be a simple matter. It can be difficult for those who have experienced combat to pinpoint a specific traumatic event that precipitated PTSD. While some are able to identify a particularly bad firefight or the loss of a friend as a triggering event, says Colonel Charles Hoge, chief of psychiatry at Walter Reed

Army Institute of Research, "the reality is that there are also stressors that are ongoing."

Millions of dollars could hang in the balance of this reassessment, considering that last year, the VA spent \$4.3 billion on PTSD disability payments. But some are concerned that the VA is only directing its efforts to one side of the problem. The ranking democrat on the House VA Committee, Rep. Lane Evans (IL), warned, "We need to pay as much attention to improper denials as we do to improper grants." And Randy Reese, national service director for the Disabled American Veterans, expressed concern that the review would further

delay thousands of backlogged disability claims that are still unprocessed.

Congress also has been concerned lately about the effectiveness with which returning veterans are being evaluated for PTSD risk. In late July, the House VA Committee heard testimony from DoD and VA officials on this subject, and follow-up hearings are planned to monitor the VA's progress in both diagnosis and treatment. "We have much more to learn so that we can accurately diagnose [PTSD] and effectively treat it," said Committee Chair Steve Buyer (R-NY), adding that "Congress must ensure [the] VA has the resources to do both." ●