



Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) is a continuous, national survey of general practice activity in Australia in which ever changing random samples of about 1000 GPs per year take part. It commenced in 1998.

# Posttraumatic stress disorder among Australian veterans

Looking at the ongoing effects of war

Christopher Harrison, Janice Charles and Associate Professor Helena Britt

AIHW Australian General Practice Statistics and Classification Centre, University of Sydney.

Just over 3 percent of all general practice encounters recorded by BEACH (about 3000 annually) are with Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) cardholders (veterans). Most of these patients are veterans, and some are war widows and widowers.<sup>1</sup> We examined encounters with veterans from April 2004 – March 2006 to determine the rate at which depression, anxiety, alcohol problems, drug abuse and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were managed. We also compared DVA encounters with non-DVA patient encounters from the same period.

The majority of veterans (80.1%) were aged 75 years or more and 18.2 percent were aged 45–74 years. Male patients made up 55.3 percent of the total; normally in BEACH they account for 40–45 percent.

## Selected psychological problems managed among veterans

There were 6522 encounters with veterans recorded during the period, and at 348 (5.3%) of these encounters at least one of the selected psychological problems was managed. Extrapolated to all DVA-paid encounters, an estimated 179 000 encounters per year include the management of one or more of these problems.

Patients aged 45–64 years had at least one of these psychological problems managed at 14.9 percent of encounters, significantly more often than the older age groups. Male patients were significantly less likely than female patients to be managed for anxiety and marginally less likely to be managed for depression.

There was no difference between the sexes for management rates of alcohol and drug abuse, but numbers were low for these problems.

## Comparison with non-DVA patients

The 6346 veterans aged 45 years and over accounted for 98 percent of veteran patients, so we limited the comparison group to the 100 200 encounters with non-DVA patients in the same age group. We found that veterans were managed significantly less often for depression (2.6 per 100 encounters compared with 4 per 100 encounters for non-DVA patients), alcohol problems and drug abuse. There was no difference in management rates of anxiety. The exception to this pattern was PTSD, which was managed significantly more often at encounters with DVA cardholders (0.8 per 100 encounters) than non-DVA patients (0.1 per 100).

## Posttraumatic stress disorder

Having found that PTSD was managed far more often for veterans, we looked more closely at patients with this

problem. Fifty-four of the 55 cases of PTSD among veterans involved male patients. We also found a spike of PTSD among 45–64 year old veterans (6.9 per 100 encounters compared with 0.2 per 100 encounters for non-DVA patients aged 45–64 years). Narrowing the focus to male patients aged 45–64, we found that veterans had a PTSD management rate of 9 per 100 encounters compared with 0.2 for non-DVA males in the same age group.

This extraordinary result led us to speculate that a common factor for male veterans aged 45–64 was the Vietnam War (1962–72). Some 50 000 Australians, including conscripts, served in Vietnam; 520 died as a result of the war and almost 2400 were wounded. Australia's involvement in the war reached a peak in the mid to late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Many of the military personnel were in their early twenties at that time and survivors would now be part of this 45–64 year old group of DVA cardholders.

These results point to the continuing effect of war trauma on veterans. ♦

## Posttraumatic stress disorder was managed significantly more often for veterans

1. Department of Veteran's Affairs. Service charter, 2006. Available at: [www.dva.gov.au/media/publicat/2006/service\\_charter/index.htm](http://www.dva.gov.au/media/publicat/2006/service_charter/index.htm). [Accessed 7 May 2007].

2. Australian War Memorial. Vietnam War 1962–72. Available at: [www.awm.gov.au/atwar/vietnam.htm](http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/vietnam.htm). [Accessed 7 May 2007].