



A paper from the lab of Dartmouth microbiologist George O'Toole, Ph.D., plus one from a Cornell lab with which O'Toole collaborates, were highlighted as "Editors' Picks" in the journal *PLoS Biology*.

Study documents veterans' diagnoses

Mental health conditions are common among men and women returning from military combat, but help for those conditions is not always easy to find. DMS researcher Tracy Stecker, Ph.D., set out to examine exactly how prevalent mental health problems are among combat veterans. Among other conclusions, she discovered a high rate of diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), indicating that many veterans are in need of treatment.

Stecker used a national Veterans Affairs database to examine the incidence of various medical and mental health conditions for combat veterans from 2001 to 2006. The most common diagnosis among veterans who received care at VA medical centers was pain, with almost half reporting pain. The next two most common diagnoses were for mental health conditions: depression (affecting about 13% of patients) and PTSD (about 12%).

Worse: To make things worse, Stecker says, many veterans suffering from these and other mental health conditions never receive treatment for them. And it's likely that this assessment underestimates

the prevalence of mental health problems.

Stecker published her findings in the journal *Psychosomatics*, highlighting the particularly damaging combination of pain, PTSD, and depression, which often afflict patients together. Stecker says the most effective treatments for PTSD are exposure therapy and cognitive behavior therapy, but the fact that many of these problems can be found together in a single patient, along with self-medication with alcohol and drugs, can make treatment even more difficult than it would otherwise be.

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Pain: Although most VA medical centers are equipped to deal with pain, not all have psychiatric or counseling facilities. Stecker recommends locating psychiatric staff at pain centers to help treat patients with both diagnoses.

When adequate mental health care is not provided, it can lead to long-term problems. Many veterans are redeployed before ever receiving help, which can make them even more in need of help when they complete their service. And PTSD can sometimes be triggered long after active duty ends. For example, Stecker notes, after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, there was a local increase in the number of Vietnam veterans reporting problems with PTSD.

Seek: Stecker says the stigma associated with psychiatric disorders is the primary reason veterans do not always seek treatment, but recent research shows this stigma seems to be decreasing. This could be due to better awareness regarding mental illness, or, says Stecker, because veterans are now "struggling so much with their conditions that stigma is no longer a barrier to attempting to attain help."

She plans to use the findings as the basis for a trial on the use of mental health care by veterans. KATHERINE DAWSON

Count down

In rural America, pediatricians and family doctors are in short supply, according to a study by DMS pediatrician Scott Shipman, M.D., *et al.* Between 1996 and 2006, the number of pediatric and family physicians increased 51% and 35%, respectively, but rural children's access to care remained poor. In 2006, 15 million children lived in areas with more than 4,400 children for each pediatric or family physician. Worse still, almost one million children lived in areas where there were no such physicians at all. Better workforce policies "aimed at reducing disparities in geographic access to primary-care physicians for children" is what's needed, wrote the researchers in *Pediatrics*.



Overexposure

Cigarette ads may be almost as harmful as cigarettes themselves, suggests a recent study conducted in Germany with help from DMS pediatrician James Sargent, M.D. The study, published in *Pediatrics*, links teens' exposure to cigarette ads to the initiation of smoking. "Our results . . . underline the specificity of the relationship between tobacco marketing and teen smoking" wrote the study's authors. In fact, teens in the highest exposure group were almost 50% more likely to begin smoking during the study than those in the lowest-exposure group.



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