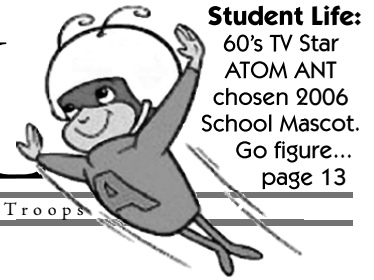


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VETS' ILLS MOUNTING FAST

Correspondent Juan Gonzalez

WASHINGTON (AP) Nearly 120,000 veterans - more than one of every four who served in Iraq and Afghanistan - have already sought treatment at Veterans Health Administration hospitals for a wide range of illnesses, according to an internal study the VHA completed late last year.

More than 30% of those sick veterans are afflicted with some type of mental disorder, mostly posttraumatic stress and depression.

An additional 35,000 - more than 29% of the total - were diagnosed with "ill-defined conditions," according to the study, which was prepared in October by VHA epidemiologist Dr. Han Kang but has yet to be publicly released.

"Those numbers are way higher than during the Persian Gulf War for 'ill-defined' symptoms," said one Department of Veterans Affairs official who asked not to be identified.

Nearly two years ago, I reported about a group of nine New York National Guardsmen from the 442nd Military Police Co. who returned from Iraq with medical problems the Army listed as "ill-defined." Nearly half of those soldiers - four out of nine - later showed signs, in independent tests arranged by the Daily News, of exposure to depleted uranium dust from exploded U.S. shells.

Mental disorders, however, rank as the biggest problem among ailing veterans.

Two previous military studies of combat troops in Iraq found that 17% to 25% of U.S. soldiers suffer from major depression or combat stress.

All the studies show a far higher rate of mental problems among our troops than during the Persian Gulf War, and levels comparable to what was found among U.S. troops during the Vietnam War.

Kang's report, because it includes only soldiers who voluntarily checked themselves in for treatment, could be understating the level of mental disorders, say veterans advocates who have seen summaries of his findings.

"With numbers this high, the problem is going to grow fast," said Paul Rieckhoff, a former lieutenant with the 1st Infantry Division in Iraq and founder and executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

"We're seeing systemwide there are major problems," Rieckhoff said. "Most local VAs just aren't prepared for the influx of sick veterans."

Rieckhoff's view is buttressed by a U.S. General Accounting Office study released last February.

Department of Veterans Affairs spokesman Jim Benson cautioned yesterday that it is difficult to compare the number of veterans from the current conflicts seeking help with those from previous wars.

Before 1998, Benson said, VA hospitals provided free health care only to veterans who had first been certified as suffering from some form of service-connected illness.

But in 1998, Congress mandated that all veterans be eligible for free health care for the first two years after being demobilized. After that, the free care can continue only if the veteran can prove a service-connected illness.

Well, at least President Bush has finally begun to recognize that the veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan can't be forgotten once they return home.

Top veterans officials announced yesterday that Bush is seeking \$80.6 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs for next year's budget - a record increase of more than 12% above the current budget.

His request includes an additional \$3.5 billion for veterans' health care.

But in a chilling sign of the terrible toll our nation has yet to pay for this dreadful war in Iraq, Bush earmarked an additional \$78 million to build six new national cemeteries and expand three existing ones.

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