

# WRIISC *Advantage*

WINTER 2018

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- ▶ **LEARN MORE** about why Post Deployment Health Services (PDHS) – War Related Illness & Injury Study Center (WRIISC) are **FOUNDATIONAL SERVICES**
- ▶ **Read ALL ABOUT BALANCE!**
- ▶ **Free MINDFULNESS MEDITATION Classes** available by phone for Veterans!

Cornerstones of VA Health Care:

# PDHS-WRIISC ▶

In this edition of WRIISC Advantage, VA's Post Deployment Health Services (PDHS) Chief Consultant discusses PDHS-WRIISC's important role in the VA Health Care System. Additionally, we offer information for Vietnam Veterans seeking WRIISC Services and Veterans with balance abnormalities. Check out our newest feature— "Research Matters"!



As a "VA-Delivered Foundational Service," PDHS-WRIISC provides an **essential service to Veterans** that cannot be found outside of VA in **managing military-related conditions and disorders.**

## SPOTLIGHT:

Words from Dr. Ralph Loren Erickson, VA's Chief Consultant of PDHS

These are exciting days for VA as we redesign and modernize all that our VA family does for Veterans. I'm particularly proud to announce that PDHS-WRIISC have now been officially designated as a "VA-Delivered Foundational Service." This means that we provide an essential service to Veterans that cannot be found outside of VA in managing military-related conditions and disorders. We're foundational because we provide clinical services, research, and education related to the management of military-related conditions. Our program will likely grow in size as we guide all of VA in delivering key aspects of world class care and services for Veterans.

The new Ken Burns PBS documentary "The Vietnam War" graphically reminds us of the adverse health effects of combat and Agent Orange exposure for those who served in Vietnam. (This includes my dad by the way!) I can readily identify with our Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans as my own Army career took me to both Iraq and Afghanistan under hostile fire. It's no surprise to me why we have important and ongoing environmental exposure registries and are so diligently studying airborne hazards such as burn pits. All Veterans and their families know that toxic environmental exposures are serious whether they occur on the battlefield or in garrison back in the U.S. The contaminated drinking water at Camp Lejeune, NC, is one such example.

Preparing for the future, we are actively developing a state-of-the-art database called the Individual Longitudinal Exposure Record (ILER) which will document all of the exposures of every service member in real time. (Read more about ILER on page 6.) These are exciting days indeed and our commitment to the Veterans we serve remains as strong as ever!

*Ralph Loren Erickson, MD, MPH, DrPH*

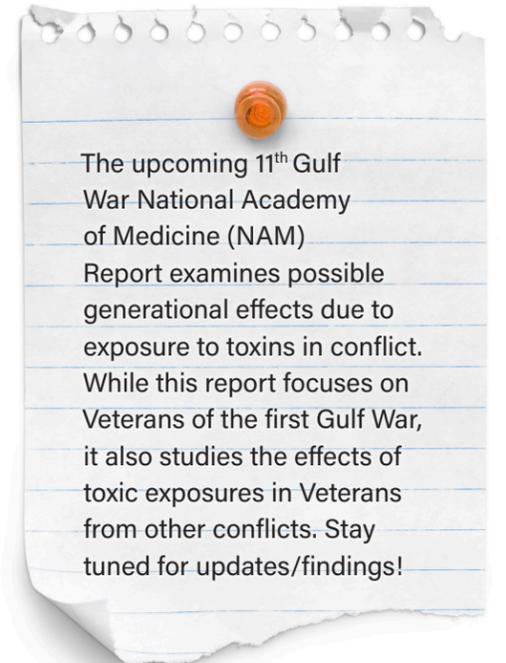
Ralph Loren Erickson, MD, MPH, DrPH

# WRIISC Continues to Serve Vietnam Veterans

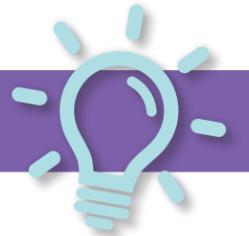
**THE WRIISC OFFERS SERVICES** aimed at caring for all deployed Veterans, including Vietnam Veterans. Our Multi-Disciplinary Comprehensive Clinical Evaluation is intended for Vietnam Veterans who have had a thorough work-up by other health care providers, had an Agent Orange Registry Exam, and still have health concerns that are possibly related to their deployment. An Individualized Environmental Exposure Assessment addresses concerns about a particular military-related occupational or environmental exposure, including Agent Orange.

We also offer group education classes designed specifically for Vietnam Veterans. These classes, titled, "Agent Orange: What You Need to Know," are taught by experts in environmental exposures and give Vietnam Veterans the most up-to-date knowledge about Agent Orange by both addressing exposure concerns and providing additional resources. Offered regularly at WRIISC locations in New Jersey and Washington, we plan to deliver these classes remotely using telehealth technology to reach an even bigger audience.

Finally, several research projects at WRIISC facilities in NJ and CA are currently recruiting Veterans from all eras as participants. For more information call NJ WRIISC at 1-800-248-8005 or CA WRIISC at 1-888-482-4376. 📞



## Research MATTERS!



**VETERANS OFTEN WONDER** about the results of research they volunteer for or hear about. To provide more frequent updates of our research efforts and publications to the Veteran and VA health care community, this feature will appear in each upcoming edition of WRIISC Advantage.

**PUBLICATION TITLE:** High Healthcare Utilization Near the Onset of Medically Unexplained Symptoms

**QUESTION:** What is the long term relationship between increasing physical symptom burden (experience of the effects of more physical health symptoms) and Medically Unexplained Symptoms (MUS) (symptoms with no known medical cause) and health care utilization (amount of doctor visits) for Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom soldiers?

**FINDINGS:** This publication shows that increases in physical symptom burden predicted greater health care utilization (visits to a primary care practitioner) one year after deployment. There were no significant differences in utilization between those with levels of physical symptom burden that remained consistent (at the same level) over one year.

**MEANING:** This is the first study of its kind to examine, and show, a relationship between the onset (beginning) of physical symptoms and greater health care utilization. The data also suggest that patients with increasing physical symptom burden use health care at the same level as patients with chronic physical symptom burden. Next steps to better understand why health care utilization increases and how best to care for these patients include looking at the treatment and management offered to identify best practices to reduce the burden of symptoms when they first begin.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:** This research appears in the Journal of Psychosomatic Research, July 2017, Volume 98. Drs. Lisa McAndrew and Drew Helmer are authors from the NJ WRIISC. 📞

# All About Balance

**VETERANS** evaluated at the WRIISC frequently present with balance disorders and frustration regarding their symptoms. Symptoms of a balance disorder may consist of an unsteady, "woozy" feeling or a sudden sensation that the room is spinning or moving when sitting or standing still (vertigo). These symptoms can take a real toll— physically *and* emotionally— and even cause more unpleasant symptoms like headaches. It is important that all Veterans are aware of the ABC's of the balance system and know when it is important to talk with a primary care provider about changes.

Did you know that humans rely on three separate systems for balance: muscles and movement, hearing and the vestibular system which controls balance within the inner ear, and eyesight?

Balance disorders in Veterans may be brought on by any number of things, such as:

- ✓ Infections
- ✓ Medications
- ✓ Exposures to certain chemicals/toxins
- ✓ Traumatic Brain Injury and concussions
- ✓ Blast Exposure/Injuries



After a Veteran discusses balance concerns with a primary care provider, a referral to an audiologist (a hearing specialist), an otolaryngologist (an ear, nose, and throat specialist, or ENT), and/or a neurologist (a specialist in

nerve-related ear disorders) might be warranted for additional specialty testing. A hearing test is usually needed before a diagnosis is made and blood test results are thoroughly evaluated. A primary care team can help manage symptoms and aid rehabilitation with support from services such as physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R). Veterans looking to improve balance on their own might try one of these activities after consulting with a doctor:

- ✓ Yoga
- ✓ Meditation
- ✓ Tai-chi

For Veterans with balance disorders seeking tips to further improve function, visit:

 [https://vestibular.org/living-vestibular-disorder/everyday-challenges.](https://vestibular.org/living-vestibular-disorder/everyday-challenges)



## WRIISC offers new phone-based Mindfulness Meditation Classes for Veterans

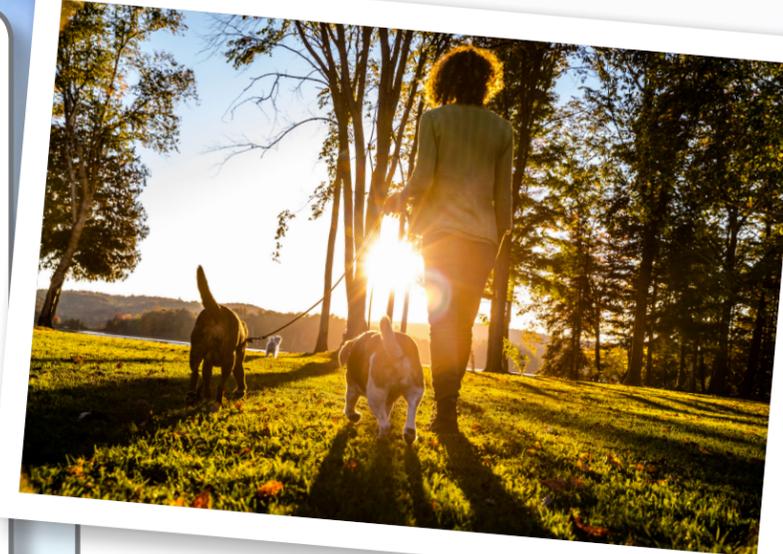
**MINDFULNESS MEDITATION** is an evidence-based, VA-supported mind-body technique that helps Veterans face the challenges and stressors of everyday life.

Research has shown a connection between mind and body that can be used to improve health. When your mind is relaxed and focused on healing, your body can relax and focus on healing too. Meditation can be safely used in conjunction with other medical treatments such as prescribed medication or exercise.

Mindfulness Meditation teaches acceptance and awareness of what's going on around you as well as what's going on inside of you.

It has been **effective** in treating health conditions such as **insomnia, anxiety, high blood pressure, chronic pain, and post deployment stress disorder (PTSD).**

Mindfulness Meditation can be practiced sitting down, lying down, stretching, eating, even while walking the dog!



**THREE MINDFULNESS MEDITATION CLASSES** will be offered monthly; one class on each of the last three Fridays of the month. Take one or all three classes! We encourage you to take as many as you can!

**TIME:** 11am – 12 noon, Eastern Standard Time (EST)

**LOCATION:** This class will be offered via telephone using a toll free number.

**FACILITATOR:** Doreen Korn RN, MA, AHN-BC, HWNC-BC Integrative Health Coordinator and War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) Educator, VANJHCS

Registration Required.

**TO REGISTER:**  
Call Doreen Korn: 973-676-1000 extension 2364 OR

Send a secure message via MyHealthVet to: "WRIISC Attend Veteran Education Class NJHCS".

# Around the WRIISC News



**WRIISC Advantage**

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## DC WRIISC

### Advancing Care for Veterans with Environmental Exposure

IN 1994, VA first wrote of creating a system of record that can collect, present, and/or provide individual and population-level exposure related information. At the time, technology was limited but now, VA is developing the Individual Longitudinal Exposure Record (ILER), which will allow for the electronic transfer of Veterans' exposure data between DoD/VA. The ILER will create a common military exposure record including both DoD/VA medical records that details military exposures over the course of a Veteran's military career. This is vital because presently there is no such system in place.

The current methods to access exposure related information for Veterans are inefficient and often have incomplete information. As a result, this process is time-consuming with VA personnel and Veterans having to contact multiple departments and systems to try to gather this information. This inefficient process often results in delays and incomplete information and is frustrating for both Veterans and VA staff.

ILER will provide an improved basis for delivering DoD/VA exposure-related health care, medical surveillance, research and development, review of health outcomes, and disability benefits. The ultimate goal is to create a more Veteran-centric approach at VA and provide timely and accurate exposure information that will address Veteran exposure concerns in the most effective manner.

During the past year, VA's DC WRIISC, PDHS, and DoD have been working with clinicians, researchers, VA benefits claim representatives, and IT personnel to develop a pilot ILER. Staff members at the DC WRIISC are excited to work on this major initiative geared towards providing better service and quality of care for Veterans at VA!

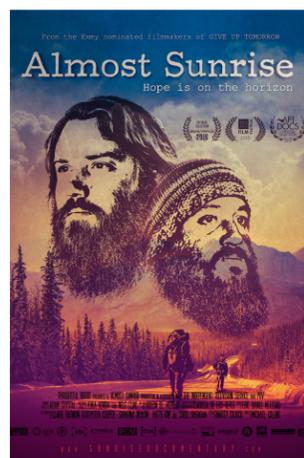
## CA WRIISC

### Dedication to Helping Veterans with Mental Health Conditions

**BETTERING THE LIVES OF VETERANS** living with mental health conditions remains priority at the CA WRIISC. Dr. Peter Bayley recently participated on a panel discussion at Google's headquarters in Mountain View, CA, on moral injury and Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD) after a screening of the documentary film "Almost Sunrise." The Director, Michael Collins, is an Emmy-winning film maker currently showing the film as part of a campaign to empower Veterans, family members, and health care providers to explore evidence-based solutions for moral injury, PTSD, and breaking the stigma around mental health. The movie follows two Iraq Veterans, Tom Voss and Anthony Anderson, who embark on a 2,700 mile walk across America as a way to confront their inner pain. A seminal point in Tom's journey is his introduction to a breathing-based meditation technique known as SKY Breathing, which helped him move through his trauma and gain a new lease on life.

CA WRIISC currently has a research study to determine how the SKY Breathing technique compares to a standard VA treatment for Veterans living with PTSD. For more information or to participate, please contact the study team at 650-785-6661!



"ALMOST SUNRISE"  
MOVIE POSTER

## NJ WRIISC

### NJ WRIISC Contributes to DoD/VA Joint Airborne Hazards Symposium

**EXPOSURE TO AIRBORNE HAZARDS/** resulting health effects remain priority issues for the Department of Defense (DoD)/VA to address. In an aim to educate the VA community and facilitate exchange of information about the topic, the 6th annual joint DoD/VA Airborne Hazards Symposium was held in Washington, DC on May 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of 2017. PDHS and DoD led the effort in planning the symposium which had an audience of nearly 60 DoD/VA researchers and clinicians, members of Veterans Service Organizations, and stakeholders in Veterans health.

The symposium's focus included clinician education directed at improving the quality of care and trust in VA care for Veterans with airborne hazard exposure. Several faculty members from the NJ WRIISC participated in the Symposium planning and also served as presenters as well as leaders/moderators of session panels. WRIISC team members who played prominent roles in the symposium were: Dr. Anays Sotolongo, Dr. Michael Falvo, Dr. Omowunmi Osinubi, Dr. Susan Santos, and Nisha Jani. WRIISC's broad expertise, contributions, and accomplishments in the field, especially resulting from establishment of the WRIISC Airborne Hazards Center of Excellence (AHCE), were greatly recognized. 🇺🇸

**ATTENTION READER:** Do you prefer to receive the WRIISC Advantage newsletter electronically? Email us at [wriisc.nj@va.gov](mailto:wriisc.nj@va.gov) with your full name and preferred email address.

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This newsletter contains a minimum of 30% post-consumer waste.

## On-demand post deployment training for providers now available on TRAIN (public) and TMS (VA-internal) with accreditation:

**WRIISC**  
War Related Illness & Injury Study Center  
Post-Deployment Health Services

### Common Exposures

**Solvents**  
Many Servicemembers use industrial solvents in regular military tasks such as cleaning, degreasing, paint stripping, and thinning oil-based paints. Too much exposure to some industrial solvents can cause short-term and long-term health effects. Solvents may impact your health depending on the specific chemical, level of concentration, length of exposure and how it enters the body. Such health impacts may manifest as:

- Blood disorders,
- Liver injuries or
- Neurological Disease,
- Kidney injuries.

For more information, visit:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/87-104/default.html>  
<http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/solvents/>  
If the links are not active, simply type the URL into a new browser window.



**Metals**

You must review all of the hazards before proceeding to the next page.

Access our training by visiting:



- <https://www.TRAIN.org> (public) or
  - <https://www.TMS.va.gov> (VA-internal)
- and search for "WRIISC"