

A National Newsletter for Veterans and their Health Care Providers

WRIISC Advantage

SUMMER 2019

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:



Newly Designated Airborne Hazards
and Burn Pits Center of Excellence



VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Patient Care Services
Post-Deployment Health

Welcome to the Summer WRIISC Advantage Newsletter! In this edition, we focus on health coaching and its role in Veterans care. We also include our latest news.

DIRECTORS' CORNER



The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has made significant progress in delivering individualized care to Veterans over the past several years.

This approach has been at the center of clinical services and education provided by WRIISC. This patient-centered care transformation has led to the application of the concept of whole health in VA medical centers across the country. A whole health approach recognizes that healthcare involves much more than just treating the physical human body and instead focuses on the overall or complete person- "the big picture". *Implementing health coaching within VA and at the WRIISC advances the VA Secretary's goal to provide better customer service to Veterans and gives Veterans even more reasons to choose VA for health care!*

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Director, CA WRIISC

Drew Helmer, MD, MS
Director, NJ WRIISC

Matt Reinhard, PsyD
Director, DC WRIISC

A Note from NJ WRIISC Director Dr. Drew Helmer:

As of late Summer, I will take a full-time position at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston, TX, as Deputy Director at the Center for Innovations in Quality, Effectiveness and Safety (IQuEst). I have been Director of the NJ WRIISC since 2011 and also worked at the NJ WRIISC from 2001-2007. The WRIISC is a special place with outstanding people, a compelling mission, and a track record of positive impact. With numerous recent successes and strong leadership, the WRIISC is in a great position to advance its mission and meet the challenges of helping deployed Veterans with unexplained symptoms or difficult to diagnose illnesses through research, education, clinical care, and risk communication. I will never forget my time spent at the WRIISC and look forward to all future collaborations!

It is Official!

The Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE) at NJ WRIISC, established in 2013, was officially recognized by Congress and the President in Public Law 115-929 as a VA Center of Excellence.

"The Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE) team is enthusiastic to continue our work understanding the effects of respiratory irritants on the Veteran population. Newly learned information will be applied to clinical care, allowing Veteran caregivers to provide Veterans with more advanced techniques for treating and managing symptoms."

Dr. Anays Sotolongo, WRIISC AHBPCE director

Health Coaching at the VA: A Key to Successful Living

Veterans might hear the term health coaching at the VA and wonder "what is it?", "how can it help me?", or "can it positively change my health?" For Veterans living with a chronic condition or chronic symptoms, having answers to these questions is most important. The reason is simple: health coaching may help Veterans as they live day to day WITH chronic symptoms. Health coaching supports a whole health and functional medicine framework. This approach focuses on the individual and their goals for health and looking at the Veteran's preferences for treatment and supporting their efforts to achieve health goals. Certified health coaches are becoming more and more available at the VA.

A designated health coach evaluates what is most important to the Veteran and assists a Veteran in making a plan and setting goals to improve current health status (how they are feeling and functioning), ultimately empowering a Veteran to make changes. Health coaches provide a Veteran with self-management support and act as a bridge between the clinician and patient. They also help a Veteran navigate the health care system and provide support and continuity (or follow up). They resemble somewhat of a Veteran's "personal care champion."



Functional Medicine (FM) is a personalized, systems-oriented model that empowers patients and practitioners to achieve the highest expression of health by working in collaboration to address the underlying causes of disease. FM looks at the root causes of health problems (or the way that organs in the body work or malfunction) and examines the breakdown as opposed to only treating symptoms. Consistent with the Whole Health model, FM incorporates natural life style changes and on healing the body through individually-tailored approaches.

The WRIISC continues to incorporate health coaching into its clinical care, research, and patient education efforts.

A telehealth coaching clinic began in May 2018 at the DC WRIISC. Through health coaching intervention, Veterans have lost weight, started exercising, made healthy dietary changes, reduced glucose levels, and improved sleep quality. Managing stress more effectively and making other meaningful changes to improve quality of life and health are other benefits that participants have reported. The program's availability via telephone and video connect gives Veterans easy access and greater choices.

The NJ WRIISC and CA WRIISC are exploring the use of health coaching to support Veterans in implementing detailed recommendations provided after a WRIISC clinical evaluation. Veterans already receive a one-on-one health education session at the end of their NJ WRIISC evaluation. Prior to returning home, tools are given to make lifestyle changes that support good health and well-being. The VHA Whole Health and Functional Medicine models of care provide the framework for the dietary changes, stress reduction techniques, modified exercise programs, and other interventions offered. Frequently, Veterans are open to engage in these recommendations but find they need support to do so. That is where health coaching will be critical.

(Health Coaching cont'd) In addition to developing a health coaching program for clinical Veterans, a new study at the NJ WRIISC, "Evaluating Health Coaching for Chronic Pain," will test if a telephone delivered behavioral health coaching intervention for Veterans with chronic pain is effective. This intervention is designed to improve functioning in a range of lifestyle areas (e.g., nutrition, physical activity, etc.). Making these lifestyle changes has been linked to lowering inflammation for patients with chronic pain. To learn more about this study please call 800-225-5170.

Whether through day-to-day clinical support or ground-breaking research, the WRIISC plans to advance ways to provide encouragement for Veterans by implementing health coaching.

Using health coaching, each WRIISC site looks ahead to a future of improving the lives of more and more Veterans and to making new research contributions in the field!

Growing Provider Knowledge- WRIISC VISN Training

As a VA core service, WRIISC is a national resource for Veterans and their providers. Recently WRIISC staff had the opportunity to share expertise with and expand education for those caring for Veterans with post deployment health concerns at three training conferences held in May and June of 2019.

In May, CA WRIISC hosted a conference for providers from VISN 21 at the Las Vegas VA Education Facility. A conference for VISN 5 providers hosted by the DC WRIISC also took place in May at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. Lastly, the NJ WRIISC hosted its conference for VISN 2 providers at the Albany Stratton VA Medical Center Campus in June.

The three WRIISC VISN conferences were all focused on one main goal- meeting identified gaps in the care of Veterans with deployment health concerns. Trainings like this create a high-performance network of clinicians equipped with the best knowledge and skills to effectively serve Veterans.

Educating Veterans: Our Most Important Customer

While educating providers remains important, helping Veterans better understand deployment related health concerns is key. To broaden our education reach, the WRIISC is hosting more Veteran classes than ever before, reaching more and more people through remote learning. Recent classes hosted in spring of this year include Airborne Hazards, Agent Orange, Camp Lejeune, and Gulf War Exposures.

The most recent class on Gulf War Exposures hosted in May 2019 at the NJ WRIISC was available via telehealth to Veterans at six other VA sites –the most locations we have been able to engage with simultaneously to date! Improving our ability to engage with Veterans wherever they are is a mission-critical priority for the WRIISC. As a National Center, the ability to use telehealth modalities is especially important!

Research Matters

WRIISC involvement in research that relates to Veterans' health is continuous. Below is a study recently submitted for publication by the CA WRIISC.

PUBLICATION TITLE:

Yoga is effective in reducing pain in Veterans with Gulf War illness (GWI): A randomized clinical trial

QUESTION:

How does yoga compare to a more established treatment, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) (a mental health treatment aimed at changing unhelpful thoughts), for the management of chronic pain among Veterans with GWI?

FINDINGS:

Results showed that participants assigned to the yoga treatment experienced a greater decrease in total pain, and fatigue, compared to participants assigned to the CBT treatment.



MEANING:

Yoga is a promising treatment for GWI. It appears that yoga may be more effective than CBT, an established treatment for GWI and other chronic multisymptom illnesses.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: Researchers include Dr. Peter J. Bayley, CA WRIISC Research Director, and his team.

WRIISC AHBPCE Research Updates

The Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE) research program continues to draw from its expert clinical experience in airborne hazards to develop testable research questions in collaboration with academic (Rutgers, University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Michigan, Ohio State University) and federal (Walter Reed Army Institute of Research) collaborators. Listed below are two examples of current AHBPCE research:

Blast Study: Among participants of the Airborne Hazards Open Burn Pit Registry (AHOBPR), AHBPCE researchers noted an independent association (or relationship) between blast exposure during deployment and cardiopulmonary symptoms (Jani et al. Ann Intern Med). To understand this relationship, the research team collaborated with investigators from Walter Reed Army Institute of Research to prepare a translational research project that was recently funded by the Department of Defense to investigate both the mechanisms (animal) and clinical sequelae (human) of exposure to blast overpressure waves.

Pulmonary Vascular Project: In the AHBPCE clinical referral population, the team noticed a concerning pulmonary function pattern consistent with abnormal gas-exchange that may be suggestive of dysfunction within the pulmonary vasculature (Falvo et al. 2018 Clin Resp J). In a project funded by VA Office of Research and Development, AHBPCE researchers are now exploring this pattern in greater depth to better understand how the pulmonary vascular system functions during exercise stress, with emphasis on the right ventricular-pulmonary vascular (heart-lung) interaction. Additional components of this study will evaluate novel techniques to assess pulmonary gas-exchange as well as assess the peripheral vascular system..

Read more about the AHBPCE here: <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/publications/oef-oif-ond/post-9-11-vet-2018/ahce.asp>.

Stay tuned for more research updates from the AHBPCE and WRIISC team.

Around the WRIISC News



WRIISC Advantage

SUMMER 2019

NJ WRIISC

NJ WRIISC Gains Insight into Care for Gulf War Illness (GWI)

Many Gulf War Veterans (GWVs) who were deployed to the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm/ Operation Desert Shield (1990-1991) experience a combination of chronic symptoms. These can include fatigue, pain, trouble with memory and concentration, skin rashes, gastrointestinal issues and breathing difficulty. These clusters of symptoms have come to be known as Gulf War Illness (GWI).

Because the presentation of GWI depends on an inconsistent set of symptoms, the term GWI is understood to mean different things by different people. Unfortunately, this has led to confusion which has negatively impacted Veterans' health care. A common and up-to-date understanding of GWI and its associated health concerns for GWVs is a critical component in the delivery of optimal care to affected Veterans.

A study based at the NJ WRIISC, "WRIISC as a Model of Care for Chronic Multi-Symptom Illness," aims to learn how health care providers and GWVs think and talk about GWI. Specifically, the researchers are interested in learning if a shared understanding of GWI between Veterans and their providers will result in better satisfaction and treatment recommendations. GWVs with GWI who have an upcoming appointment with a VA primary care provider anywhere in the country can contact the WRIISC to find out if they are eligible to participate in this study.

To learn more, call 800-225-5170 or visit: <https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/warrelatedillness/research/volunteer/nj-wriisc.asp#wriisc-model-cmi>

CA WRIISC

Clinical Services Expand

With the ever-growing team at the CA WRIISC, three new services have been added! To start, the CA WRIISC Education Director and Registered Dietitian is also a Certified Health Coach. Similar to the DC WRIISC program and working towards Veteran empowerment, the CA WRIISC is planning to start a health coaching clinic to support Veterans after WRIISC evaluations. Details are discussed on page 2.

Second, as of June 2019 the CA WRIISC started a telehealth clinic focused specifically on addressing exposure concerns of Veterans. An expert in environmental medicine is available to answer questions about environmental exposures and any potential health effects. For example, this service may be helpful for a Veteran who was near burn pits and had certain vaccinations and now has symptoms that they think may be related to those exposures. This program will offer an appointment focused on exposure concerns to Veterans from the convenience of their own home. Currently this clinic is held one day a week, with the possibility of expansion in accordance with need.

Finally, the CA WRIISC Social Worker is developing a follow up program to assess Veterans progress toward achieving their personal health goals following the week long, in-person WRIISC comprehensive clinical evaluations. This will be done using satisfaction surveys and qualitative assessments conducted on follow up phone calls at 3- and 12-months post evaluation. The focus is on successes, challenges, and barriers to implementation of WRIISC recommendations and the level of empowerment the Veteran feels for their own care, etc. These check-ins will help the WRIISC assess areas of its success and needed adjustments. CA WRIISC is excited to provide these additional services and hopeful it will continue to improve the care offered to our Veterans!

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Do you prefer to receive the WRIISC Advantage newsletter electronically?

Email us at wriisc.nj@va.gov with your full name and preferred email address.

DC WRIISC

DC WRIISC Extends Partnerships and Collaborations

A letter from a Veteran to the DC WRIISC Director has led to a new and unique relationship between members of the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) community, DC WRIISC, Veteran service member organizations and DoD partners. In response to the concerns of EOD Veterans and service members, DC WRIISC is engaged with a working group developing a standardized health evaluation for this group. This evaluation would be used to capture baseline and repeated health measures to support care delivery to service members while on active duty and following their transition to VA care.

As part of these efforts, DC WRIISC is also developing a partnership with the Center for Neuroscience and Regenerative Medicine (CNRM) for EOD Veterans to undergo clinical evaluation at the DC WRIISC and then enroll in CNRM's research protocol at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

In addition, DC WRIISC is working to better understand how the EOD community is affected by suicide, the magnitude of the problem, and what best practices might be shared to assure that health care providers and community members can detect increase of risk and prevent suicide. DC WRIISC plans to discuss these issues at the EOD Global Symposium in August 2019. The outcome of these collective endeavors includes potential for new clinical trials, development of clinical data repositories and novel partnerships between federal and academic institutions (e.g. Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Naval Medical Research Center, and University of Maryland).

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VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs



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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

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Metals

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

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