

## Healthcare for Veterans

Medical care for ex-Service personnel is the responsibility of the NHS. However, since 1948, there has been an entitlement to priority access for war pensioners to treatment for conditions relating to their service.

On 23 November 2007, the Minister for Health and Social Services announced that all service veterans will be entitled to priority NHS treatment and care in Wales. This provision covers all veterans where a person has a health problem as result of their military service. They no longer need first to have applied and become entitled to a war pension.

When referring a patient who they know to be a veteran for secondary (more specialist) care, GPs have now been asked to consider if, in their clinical opinion, the condition may be related to the patient's military service. Priority treatment **ONLY** applies to conditions which are related to veterans' service. Where this is the case, and with the patient's agreement, it should be made clear in the referral.

Where secondary care clinicians agree that a veteran's condition is likely to be service-related, they have been asked to prioritise veterans over other patients with the same level of clinical need. Veterans will not be given priority over other patients with more urgent clinical needs. It is for clinical practitioner to decide, on the balance of probabilities, whether a veterans' condition is related to the patients' service.

Patients are under no obligation at any time to declare themselves a veteran.

### **Mental Health Service Provision for Veterans**

On 9th March 2010 the Minister announced that a pilot project to support armed services personnel experiencing mental health problems as a result of their service will be extended across Wales.

The service, which has been trialed in the Cardiff and Vale and Cwm Taf Health Board areas, offered access to clinicians with expertise in veterans' mental health to provide assessment and suitable treatment.

The two-year pilot was based at the University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff, funded by £135,000 from the Welsh Assembly Government and Ministry of Defence.

The new all-Wales service will be funded fully by the Assembly Government from April 2010 with an investment of £485,000 per year.

The new service will include:

- Veterans who experience mental health and well-being difficulties to have a comprehensive assessment to assess their psychological and social needs;
- Veterans and carers to be involved in the development of a management plan to meet their health and care needs; and,
- Veterans and carers to be given information on other services and support that they are entitled to in an effort to improve their health and quality of life.

The Health Minister has required Health Boards and NHS Trusts to designate an Armed Forces and Veterans' Champion to drive forward improvements. There is also a new Annual Operating Framework (AOF 11) target for 2010/11 for health bodies to specifically consider the needs of service personnel and veterans when planning services.

### **Possible points of Discussion?**

- Do clinicians in Wales know about priority access? Is there a need for an awareness campaign?

*A 2009 survey by the Royal British Legion revealed that 81% of GPs in England knew nothing or little about veterans' right to priority care.*<sup>1</sup>

- What difficulties are clinicians faced with in implementing this policy?

*For example - The system relies on self-identification by veterans, some of whom may be reluctant to make their status known. Even assuming the seamless transfer of medical records a clinician will not automatically have any way of knowing that a patient has served in the Armed Forces, let alone that his or her condition may be related to the period of service. This is all the more problematic given that some conditions can show symptoms months or years after the patient has left the Armed Forces (particularly in relation to mental health).*

- Do you know who in your Health Board / Trust area is the designated Armed Forces and Veterans' Champion?

*Do you know of any activity he/she has undertaken locally on veterans health and priority access to health care? Is it appropriate to write to the designated person for further information?*

- Are there any matters arising from the British Legions manifesto on veteran's healthcare (enclosed) which needs to be taken forward locally/nationally?

### **Further Information: Veterans in Prison / Custody**

There are 85,000 people in prison in England and Wales.

Estimates put the proportion of these who have previously served in the armed forces at anywhere between 5% and 10%. This means that at any one time some 4,000 to 8,300 prisoners have served in the armed forces. Since no definitive audit has taken place of veterans in this sector, attempts to uncover anything like the true number will be, inevitably, flawed.

Soldiers comprise by far the largest occupational group in the prison system.

This is in addition to the large number of ex-servicemen and women who are under supervision and serving community sentences or are being supervised following a lengthy prison sentence.

Research published by the National Association of Probation Officers in September 2009 revealed that misuse of alcohol or drugs was a major issue in over half the cases and nearly half were suffering from diagnosed or undiagnosed post traumatic stress disorder or depression. The principal offence was one of violence, particularly in a domestic setting. There was predominance in the use of substantial amounts of alcohol when offences occurred and yet few were identified as former veterans either at the point of arrest, the commission of their pre-sentence reports or on reception into prison.

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<sup>1</sup> Defence Analytical Services Agency, War Pensions Quarterly Statistics, September 2008

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