



Persian Gulf Review

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Information for Veterans Who Served in Desert Shield/Storm

February 1993

President Signs Persian Gulf Registry Legislation

On November 4, 1992, President Bush signed Public Law 102-585, the "Veterans Health Care Act of 1992," which among other things provides for the establishment by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) of a Persian Gulf War Veterans Health Registry.

The Registry includes the name of each individual who served in the Armed Forces in the Persian Gulf theater of operation during the Persian Gulf War and who (1) applies for health care or services from VA, (2) files a claim for compensation from VA based on disabilities associated with Persian Gulf service; (3) dies and is survived by a spouse, child, or parent who files a claim for dependency and indemnity compensation; (4) requests a health examination; or (5) receives from the Department of Defense a health examination similar to that provided by VA and requests inclusion in the VA Registry.

Persian Gulf veterans who wish to receive the examination are urged to contact the nearest VA health facility for an appointment. Veterans who choose to participate in this voluntary program will receive a basic physical examination with appropriate laboratory tests. Examining physicians pay particular attention to occupational exposures, insect bites, and infectious diseases such as leishmaniasis, and/or chemical/biological agents, contaminated food or drink, or other environmental agents. Additional diagnostic tests and referrals to specialists are made where indicated. All veterans who receive the examination are counseled regarding the results.

On December 7, 1992, James W. Holsinger, Jr., M.D., Under Secretary for Health, Department of Veterans Affairs, approved an operational manual for all VA health care facilities establishing policies and procedures for the nationwide implementation of the Persian Gulf program. This manual (known in VA as M-10, Part III) was promptly distributed to all VA medical centers for immediate action.

Outreach

Public Law 102-585 also requires VA to notify individuals listed in the Registry of significant developments in research on the health consequences of military service in the Persian Gulf theater of operations during the Persian Gulf War. Publication of this newsletter is a partial response to this mandate. VA has printed and distributed thousands of VA-produced posters inviting Persian Gulf veterans to contact the nearest VA medical center for information and assistance concerning the VA's Persian Gulf medical examination program.

A planned mobile exhibit about the VA program should be completed in early 1993, and other outreach efforts are under consideration.

OTA Study

The legislation also directs the congressional Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) to evaluate the potential utility of the VA Registry (as well as a Department of Defense Persian Gulf Registry) for scientific study and assessment of the intermediate and long-term health consequences of military service in the Persian Gulf theater of operations during the Persian Gulf War. VA officials have met with OTA staff to share information about the Registry program.

VA maintains similar registries for Vietnam veterans who may have been exposed to Agent Orange and veterans who may have been exposed to atomic radiation during the occupation of Japan at the close of World War II or during nuclear weapons testings. Approximately 220,000 Vietnam veterans have participated in the Agent Orange Registry.

VA officials have concluded that such registries are not well suited for use in scientific studies because they are based on self-referrals. On the other hand, patterns of health complaints eventually could suggest avenues for controlled research.

NAS Review of Health Consequences

In addition to the OTA study, the legislation requires VA and DOD to jointly seek to enter into an agreement with the National Academy of Sciences for the Medical Follow-Up Agency of the Institute of Medicine of the Academy to (1) review existing scientific, medical and other information on the health consequences of military service in the Persian Gulf theater of operations during the Persian Gulf War, and (2) conduct epidemiological research with respect to military and veterans populations. Negotiations are underway, and VA officials are hopeful that an agreement with NAS will be reached in the near future.

Coordination of Government Activities

The law also requires the President to designate the head of an appropriate department or agency to coordinate all research undertaken or funded by the Executive Branch of the Federal Government on the health consequences of military service in the Persian Gulf theater of operations during the Persian Gulf War. As of this writing, no designation had been made. It is anticipated, however, that action will be taken early in the new Administration.



Report Requirements

The legislation stipulates reporting requirements for the OTA, NAS, and the coordinator of Executive Branch research.

About the "Review" ...

The "Persian Gulf Review" is prepared by VA's Environmental Agents Service (EAS). The "Review" is published periodically to provide information about the concerns of Persian Gulf veterans, their families, and others interested in the possible long-term health implications of exposure to various potential environmental hazards during military service during the Persian Gulf conflict. The "Review" describes actions by VA and others to respond to these concerns. The initial issue of the newsletter was printed in October 1992. Additional issues will be prepared when warranted by significant developments. EAS anticipates publication 2-3 times annually.

The "Review" was written in late December, 1992/early January 1993 and does not include developments that occurred after the first part of January 1993.

Comments or questions about the content of the "Review" are encouraged. Suggestions and ideas for future issues of the newsletter should be sent to Donald J. Rosenblum, Writer/Editor, Persian Gulf Review, Environmental Agents Service (116A), VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20420. Requests for additional copies of this issue, should also be directed to Mr. Rosenblum. Please specify the number of copies requested.

Questions about the Persian Gulf Registry examination program should be directed to the Environmental Physician or Persian Gulf Coordinator at the nearest VA medical center. Questions regarding VA benefit programs, including disability compensation, should be referred to a veterans benefits counselor at the nearest VA facility. The telephone numbers can be found in the telephone directory under the "U.S. Government" listings.

Persian Gulf Family Support Program Established

VA Social Work Service has developed and implemented a Family Support Program for Persian Gulf War veterans and their families. The goal of this program is to assist veterans and their families in their post-Desert Storm readjustment,

Past military conflicts have exacted a toll on Armed Forces personnel and their families. The responses to the stresses of mobilization are normal and expected -- anxiety, sleep disturbances, startle response, and recurrent memories being the most well known for veterans involved. Veterans of Operation Desert Storm and their families are experiencing the expected readjustment difficulties of service in or in support of a war.

Desert Storm veterans and their families have reported readjustment difficulties in these areas: employment (decreased job satisfaction, status cut, jobs filled by someone else), family relationships (lack of communication, unsettled arguments,

feelings of isolation), sexual relationships (decreased interest and satisfaction), marital relationships (decreased intimacy, lack of trust, loss of "comfort" level), children (behavior changes, increased fear, feelings of alienation and friction), alcohol/drug (increased use to help cope with feelings), and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (sleep disturbance, startle response, thoughts and dreams of Persian Gulf experiences, anxiety, restlessness, and depression).

The Persian Gulf Family Support Program provides services to help veterans and families readjust after the stress of war. These services include (1) education on the normal and expected responses to the disruption in the lives of veterans, spouses, significant others, and children as a result of the Persian Gulf War, (2) assessment/identification of the specific problem(s) of veterans and his/her family, (3) marital and family counseling to assist with identified problem(s), (4) information and referrals provided for services and benefits available, and (5) follow-up.

Outreach is an important aspect of the Family Support Program in coordination with the Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Service Organizations, American Red Cross, Vet Centers, and National Guard and Reserve Units to assure that veterans are aware of the full range of services available.

Anyone interested in learning more about the Persian Gulf Family Support Program is encouraged to contact Social Work Service at the nearest VA medical center.

Referral Centers Assist with Difficult Diagnoses; Local VA Medical Facilities Help Most Veterans

In August 1992, VA established three Persian Gulf Referral Centers to help Persian Gulf veterans whose symptoms defy explanation through the usual diagnostic and therapeutic endeavors of a local VA medical center.

The referral centers are located at the VA medical centers in West Los Angeles, Houston, and Washington, DC. These locations were selected based on availability of clinical and academic expertise in such areas as pulmonary and infectious diseases, immunology, neuropsychology and access to toxicologic expertise. The centers have an emphasis on specific symptom complexes, such as fevers of unknown origin compounded by unexplained weight loss.

The referral centers were established when it became clear that some Desert Storm veterans were incapacitated and had symptoms which eluded explanation despite thorough medical work-ups at a VA medical center. For these veterans, VA determined that it was desirable to provide for inpatient stays to allow for observation, multidisciplinary consultations, and lengthy occupational and exposure history with an opportunity to re-examine them. For such veterans, the local VA medical centers make arrangements for the transfer to one of the referral centers.

Most veterans who have reported to their local VA medical center have been successfully treated there. The decision to send a veteran to a referral center is made by the medical center in consultation with the referral center.

The number of veterans requiring transfer to a referral center has been quite small. Only eleven veterans were transferred to a referral center in the initial three months of the referral center program. While VA anticipates that the referral center workload might increase in 1993, it is expected that few veterans will need to be transferred to referral centers.

Few Cases of Leishmaniasis Seen

The problem of leishmaniasis continues to generate public interest and concern from returning Persian Gulf veterans, Leishmaniasis is usually manifest by a skin lesion that follows the bite of an infected sandfly.

Gary A. Roselle, M.D., VA Program Director, Infectious Diseases, observed that while there have been "fewer than approximately 30 cases actually documented in returning veterans, lack of a simple diagnostic test for the disease continues to cause consternation among returning troops."

Dr. Roselle advises VA physicians examining Persian Gulf veterans that well veterans concerned about the possibility of developing leishmaniasis be reassured and told to return to the VA health care facility for treatment if medical problems develop. Dr. Roselle recommends that each veteran be provided adequate information to allay his or her concerns and to assure early attention to any persistent, unusual ailments,

If a VA physician suspects that his or her patient may have leishmaniasis, Dr. Roselle encourages the physician to refer the patient to the Infectious Disease Section at the VA Medical Center or to the nearest VA medical facility with Infectious Disease staff for full evaluation, diagnostic studies, and treatment if required.

VA Toll-Free Help-Line Responses to Persian Gulf Veterans' Concerns About Radiation

VA is encouraging veterans who were exposed to radiation during military service, including reservists and national guard personnel who served during the Persian Gulf War, to call a special toll-free telephone help-line for current information and assistance.

VA counselors will explain benefits, services, and medical research related to radiation exposure and provide assistance in filing or reopening radiation-related disability compensation claims. The 24-hour, toll-free number is 1-800-827-0365.

The help-line is staffed 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday (holidays excepted). Calls received at other times are answered the following business day. The radiation help-line supplements VA's single, nationwide, toll-free number -- 1-800-827-1000 -- inaugurated October 26, 1992.

American troops in the Persian Gulf were exposed to depleted uranium or DU in several ways. (DU has a low level of radioactivity.) A few were injuries by "friendly fire;" more were crewmembers in relatively close contact with munitions in tanks or other vehicles. U.S. soldiers may have been exposed to smoke or particulates containing DU while fighting a fire at Doha Depot or entering vehicles or bunkers hit by DU projectiles. A few personnel have retained DU shrapnel fragments.

Twenty-seven members of one reserve unit entered vehicles damaged by U.S. fire and have worried about possible health effects. To discover whether these people have retained detectable amounts of DU, VA, in cooperation with the Department of Defense (DOD) is determining whole-body counts. The reservists are in good health.

VA and DOD are planning to follow the few soldiers and veterans who have retained DU fragments. These individuals have no clinical findings attributable to DU as a substance, but the plan is to detect any unsuspected chronic effects. These may be chemical and as such would resemble lead toxicity rather than having effects from the low-level radioactivity.

There seems to be no reason to suspect any acute or chronic health defects from exposure to DU in the Desert Storm operation. Both VA and DOD will continue to be alert to the possibility of chronic effects.

VA Physicians Updated on Persian Gulf Concerns Via Satellite Broadcasts, Conference Calls

VA Central Office personnel in Washington are providing a great deal of Persian Gulf-related information to VA physicians, other medical staff, and administrative personnel through a series of satellite broadcasts, nationwide conference calls, and mailouts.

This ongoing, large-scale communications effort is necessary because many of the individuals required to implement the VA Persian Gulf program have little or no experience dealing with the medical problems and concerns of patients who had exposure to the various environmental hazards encountered by veterans who served in Operation Desert Storm.

The concerns of Persian Gulf veterans has long been a top priority of VA. In his parting remarks to VA employees, former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Edward J. Derwinski noted that one of the three accomplishments that he was particularly proud of was "getting out front to establish a registry for Persian Gulf veterans." (The other achievements were "solid budget increases during tough economic times" and "calming the Agent Orange controversy.")

Where to Get Help

Active duty military personnel with questions or concerns about their service in the Persian Gulf region -contact your commanding officer.

Persian Gulf veterans with concerns about their health - contact the nearest VA medical center. The telephone number can be found in the local telephone directory under Department of Veterans Affairs in the "U.S. Government" listings. A Persian Gulf Registry examination will be offered. Treatment will be provided to eligible veterans.

Persian Gulf veterans in need of marital/family counseling-- contact the nearest VA medical center or VA vet center.

Persian Gulf veterans seeking disability compensation for illnesses incurred or aggravated by military service - contact a veterans benefits counselor at the nearest VA regional office or health care facility.

Persian Gulf veterans interested in learning about the wide range of benefit programs administered by VA -contact a veterans benefits counselor at the nearest VA regional office or health care facility, or call 1-800-827-1000.

Note: Representative of veterans services organizations, including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Disabled American Veterans, etc., may also be very helpful to Persian Gulf veterans.

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Who Served in Desert Storm**
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