



## Institute of Medicine Reviewing Literature on Health Effects of Gulf War Service

Under contract with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine (IOM) is conducting a 27-month (June 1, 1998-August 31, 2000) comprehensive review and analysis of scientific and medical literature regarding adverse health effects associated with exposures experienced during the Gulf War.

The review includes assessment of biological plausibility that exposures, or synergistic effects of combinations of exposures, are associated with illnesses experienced by Gulf War veterans. IOM is expected to make recommendations for additional scientific studies to resolve areas of continued scientific uncertainty related to the health consequences of Gulf War service.

Exposures under consideration in the review include, but are not limited to, depleted uranium, pesticides, insecticides, chemical and biological warfare agents, vaccines, pyridostigmine bromide, heat stress, solvents, paints, fuels, smoke from oil-well fires, and sand.

The IOM has established a committee to conduct the review. The official title of this committee is the "Committee on Health Effects Associated with Exposures Experienced During the Persian Gulf War." The committee held its first meeting on January 11-12, 1999, in Washington, DC. The committee will meet six times over the 27-month contract. The committee is chaired by Harold Sox, M.D. Dr. Sox directs the Robert Wood Johnson Generalist Physician Initiative at Dartmouth. He currently serves as President of the American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine.

Information about the Committee's activities should be posted on the NAS web site (<http://www.nas.edu>) including a brief description of the project, as well as short biographies of committee members, (*Continued Page on 3*)

## Institute of Medicine to Study Plan for Center for Post-War Illnesses

On December 24, 1998, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) signed a contract which calls for the NAS' Institute of Medicine (IOM) to consider the feasibility for the establishment of a national center (or centers) for the study of war-related illnesses and post-deployment health issues.

Investigations of the health of Gulf War veterans has generated information which indicates that ill-defined medical problems may be experienced by a proportion of veterans after all military conflicts. In response, Congress mandated the development of plans for the establishment of a National Center on War-Related Illnesses and Post-Deployment Health Issues. VA has developed preliminary plans to establish a center(s) and has been instructed to consult with the NAS in the development of these plans.

The seven-month (January 1, 1999-July 31, 1999), \$215,000 IOM study will assess preliminary VA plans and make recommendations regarding such efforts. The overall process will be governed by an IOM committee of approximately ten experts drawn from a broad range of backgrounds, such as clinical research, health services research, environmental and occupational health, and clinical medicine. The IOM Board on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention is overseeing this project.

The IOM committee is expected to meet twice during the seven months. A workshop, to be held in conjunction with the initial meeting, will explore ideas about how such a center(s) should be structured and operated and will include presentations on VA plans for its establishment. A portion of the workshop will be allocated to open public testimony. The IOM committee will develop a formal report with recommendations regarding VA's plans. The report will be made available to the public without restriction.



## **Exercise/Behavioral Therapy (EBT) Trial**

The IOM review was mandated by Section 103, Public Law 105-368, the Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998, enacted November 11, 1998. Under this law, not later than sixty days after receiving the IOM report, VA is required to submit to Congress a report on the findings and recommendations contained in the IOM report. Under Public Law 105-368, the VA report may set forth an operational plan for carrying out any recommendation in the report to establish a national center. No action to implement such a plan may be taken until the end of a ninety-day period following the submission,

To afford the public greater knowledge of the IOM's activities and an opportunity to comment on these efforts, the Academy may include on its website (<http://www.nas.edu>) the following information: (1) notices of meetings open to the public; (2) brief descriptions of projects; (3) committee appointments, if any (including biographies of committee members); (4) report information; and (5) any other pertinent information.

## **VA Begins Large Studies of Treatments for Gulf War Veterans**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is leading a \$20 million effort with the Department of Defense (DOD) to conduct two large-scale randomized, controlled treatment trials for the symptoms of undiagnosed illnesses experienced by Gulf War veterans. The trials focus on (1) exercise/behavioral therapy, and (2) antibiotic treatment.

Since the Gulf War, thousands of Gulf War veterans have suffered from a wide variety of medical complaints, including fatigue, muscle and joint pain, and difficulty with memory and thinking. Because neither the cause nor a single underlying disease process has been identified, physicians have treated veterans for their individual symptoms.

VA Cooperative Studies Evaluation Committee, an advisory panel of independent scientific experts, approved both trials described below. An international panel of experts, including scientists from the National Institutes of Health, universities, DoD, and VA, was consulted in the design of the protocols.

The EBT trial, focusing on exercise and behavioral therapy, will enroll more than 1,000 veterans who experience at least two of the three otherwise unexplained symptoms of fatigue, muscle and joint pain, and memory and thinking problems.

The trial will be conducted at multiple VA medical centers to test whether two different therapeutic interventions, alone or in combination, improve physical function. Researchers will randomly assign study volunteers to different groups receiving aerobic exercise training, cognitive behavioral therapy, together, or usual and customary medical care as a control group.

Aerobic exercise has been shown to be effective in managing symptoms of some chronic illnesses. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has also been shown to be effective in small clinical studies. CBT is a highly structured treatment strategy that teaches patients techniques for diminishing the severity of their symptoms. Investigators in this trial hypothesize that the same techniques, used individually or in combination, may help veterans suffering from such symptoms as fatigue.

The CBT trial is not aimed at curing Gulf War veterans' illnesses, but will evaluate non-pharmacological strategies for reducing the severity of veterans' symptoms so that they can achieve a higher level of function in life. The present trial, through the treatment of large numbers of veterans and the use of multiple study sites, is designed to demonstrate definitively whether exercise alone or in combination with CBT improves health.

## **Antibiotic Treatment (ABT) Trial**

The second trial focuses on *Mycoplasma fermentans*, a hypothesized infectious cause of the variety of symptoms being experienced by Gulf War veterans. Although there is no established, definitive link between infection with this organism and Gulf War veterans' illnesses, some ill veterans are taking the antibiotic doxycycline for up to one year in hopes of improving their health.

Anecdotes that this treatment may be useful to Gulf War veterans are not sufficient to establish doxycycline as an effective treatment for Gulf War veterans' illnesses. A randomized, controlled clinical study, such as the ABT trial is necessary to determine the effectiveness of antibiotics for these illnesses.

In this trial, hundreds of qualified ill veterans at several VA locations will be randomly assigned to either a placebo control group or a treatment group, whose members will receive doxycycline orally for twelve months; a qualified volunteer will be required to have evidence of infection with Mycoplasma demonstrated by detection of the organism's DNA. This study will assess improvement of physical functioning and elimination of Mycoplasma.

The EBT and ABT trials are research studies and are not part of standard clinical care for Gulf War veterans, For information on how to participate, Gulf War veterans are encouraged to call the VA's toll-free Gulf War Helpline at 1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387).

## **Institute of Medicine Reviewing Literature on Health Effects of Gulf War Service** *(Continued from Page 1)* meeting notices, and other pertinent information.

In 1970, The National Academy of Sciences chartered the IOM to enlist distinguished members of appropriate professions in the examination of policy matters pertaining to public health. In this, the IOM acts under both the Academy's 1863 congressional charter responsibility to be an advisor to the Federal government and its own initiative in identifying issues of medical care, research, and education.

The Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses first recommended the literature review. The General Accounting Office and the Senate's Special Investigation Unit on Gulf War Illnesses later recommended this project. In November 1998, Public Law 105-368 provided a legislative mandate for the review,

## **Study Indicates that British Gulf War Veterans Have Increased Rate of Health Problems**

A study of British troops who served in the Gulf War has found that Gulf War veterans have a rate of general health problems at least twice as high as British troops who were sent to Bosnia or those who stayed home. The results of the first large-scale study of the health of British Gulf War veterans were published on January 16, 1999 in *The Lancet*, a prominent British medical journal.

The article entitled, Health of UK servicemen who served in Persian Gulf War, is consistent with what has been reported in studies of Canadian and U.S. military veterans, that service in the Gulf War has adversely affected the health of troops stationed in that region. The British researchers also found that there is no evidence of a new unique illness or Gulf War syndrome.

The study of 8,195 soldiers, sailors, and airmen is the largest survey of medical symptoms completed to date, and is the first to compare Gulf War veterans with troops who served in another military conflict during the same time period.

Study participants surveyed had a total of 59 medical problems, including chronic fatigue, hair loss, rashes, headaches, joint pain, memory loss, heart problems, and nervous system disorders. While there were few differences between the Bosnia troops and those who served at the time of the Gulf War but who were not deployed, British veterans who served in the Gulf War theater of operations were about twice as likely to complain of health problems than individuals in the other two groups.

The British researchers indicated that they could not determine why health problems were more common among Gulf War veterans, but indicated there was no evidence for a no single cause, either physical or psychological.

In an editorial in the same publication, Dr. Stephen E. Straus, Chief of the Laboratory of Clinical Investigation, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, U.S. National Institutes of Health, concluded that the study is one of the most definitive conducted to date and indicated that it added weight to the hypothesis that there is no unique "Gulf War Syndrome."

## **Initial Review of the Medical Assessment Program Shows No Specific Syndrome in British Gulf War Veterans, But Troops Suffer Following Most Wars**

On January 30, 1999, the *British Medical Journal* published an article entitled, *Clinical findings for the first 1000 Gulf war veterans in the Ministry of Defence 's medical assessment programme.*

Investigators found that 59 percent of these veterans had more than one diagnosed condition, 39 percent had at least one condition for which no firm somatic or psychological diagnosis could be given, and in 9 percent of the veterans no other main diagnosis was made. Conditions characterized by fatigue were found in 24 percent of the patients.

At least 19 percent of the patients had a psychiatric condition, which in more than half was due to post-traumatic stress disorder. Musculoskeletal disorders and respiratory conditions were also found to be relatively common. Musculoskeletal disorders were seen in 18 percent and respiratory problems in 16 percent of the veterans.

Investigators reported that this initial review shows no evidence of a single illness, psychological or physical, to explain the pattern of symptoms seen in veterans in the medical examinations. However, like with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Gulf War Registry, only limited conclusions can be drawn from the evaluations since participants were volunteers. Thus the overall rates of illness could not be determined. It is not known whether the 1000 veterans evaluated in this study were representative of British Gulf War veterans as a group. From September 1990 to June 1991, over 53,000 British troops were deployed to the Gulf region.

## **About the Review...**

The "Gulf War Review" is written by VA's Environmental Agents Service (EAS). The "Review" is published to provide information about the concerns of Gulf War veterans, their families, and others interested in possible long-term health consequences of military service in the Gulf War. The "Review" describes actions by VA and others to respond to these concerns.

The most recent, prior to this, issue of the newsletter is dated December 1998. Additional issues will be prepared when warranted by significant developments. EAS anticipates publication of the "Review" three or four times annually. Four issues were published in 1995 (January, April, August, and December), three in 1996 (March, September, and December), three in 1997 (March, June, and September), and four in 1998 (March, June, October, and December). This issue is the first for 1999. It was completed in early February 1999 and does not include developments that occurred after that time.

Comments or questions concerning the content of the "Review" are encouraged. Suggestions and ideas for future issues of the newsletter should be sent to Donald J. Rosenblum, Deputy Director, Environmental Agents Service (131), VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20420.

Requests for additional copies of this and/or future issues should also be sent to Mr. Rosenblum. A limited supply of issues released in 1995-99 is available. Please specify the quantity and issue date requested. VA facilities should order additional copies from the VA Forms Depot.

Questions about the Registry examination should be directed to the Registry. Coordinator or Registry Physician at the nearest VA medical facility. The telephone number can be found in the local telephone directory under the "U.S. Government" listings. Assistance is also available from the toll-free VA Gulf War Helpline: 1-800-749-8387.

In 1997, the name of this publication changed from "Persian Gulf Review" to "Gulf War Review" to be sensitive to individuals of Persian ethnicity. The September 1997 was the first issue to carry the new name. Veterans who participated in Operation Desert Shield/Storm are now referred to as Gulf War veterans rather than Persian Gulf War veterans. The benefits and services that these veterans are eligible for are unaffected by the name change.

The same issue of the British Medical Journal included an editorial authored by Frances M. Murphy, M.D., M.P.H., Chief Consultant, Occupational and Environmental Health Strategic Health Group, VA Central Office, regarding the experiences of the U.S., U.K. and Canadian forces that served in the Gulf War.

## Spouse/Children Examination Program Expanded and Extended

The health examination program for certain spouses and children of Gulf War veterans that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) established in April 1996 was recently expanded and extended through December 31, 1999.

To be eligible for participation, an individual must (1) be the spouse or child of a veteran who is (a) listed in VA's Gulf War Veterans Health Registry, and (b) suffering from an illness or disorder; (2) be suffering from, or may have suffered from an illness or disorder (including a birth defect, miscarriage, or stillbirth) which cannot be disassociated with from the veteran's service in the Southwest Asia theater of operations; and (3) have granted VA permission to include in the Registry relevant medical data from the evaluation. The examinations are provided at more than thirty locations.

Questions about this program should be directed to the Gulf War Veterans Helpline (**1-800-PGW-VETS; 1-800-749-8387**). Individuals wishing to participate in the program should call this toll-free telephone number. No treatment is available for illnesses detected in this program. Authority for the program was initially established in Public Law 103-446. It was extended by Public Law 104-262 and most recently by Public Law 105-368, the Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998, signed by President Clinton on November 11, 1998.

In addition to extending the program, Public Law 105-368, also provided for program improvements through "enhanced flexibility" by permitting examinations to be completed under a fee arrangement and providing for VA payment of certain transportation expenses. Additional information about the program is available from the helpline number above or the nearest VA medical center.

## Has Your Address Recently Changed? Are You Receiving More than One Copy of the Review?

If you have recently moved, please use this form to update our mailing list. Send the completed form to the Gulf War Review, Environmental Agents Service (131), VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20420. Thank you.

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

Social Security  
Number \_\_\_\_\_

Old  
Address \_\_\_\_\_

New  
Address \_\_\_\_\_

If you are receiving more than one copy of the newsletter, please let us know. Write to the address above. Please provide your name, address, and social security number. Thank you.

## Bonus for Minnesota Gulf War Veterans

*Occasionally, the Gulf War Review includes information about State programs on behalf of Gulf War veterans. State programs can send relevant information to the Gulf War Review, Environmental Agents Service (131), VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20420.*

Minnesota military veterans of the Gulf War have until June 30, 1999, to file applications to receive a State bonus for their military service. For information, call the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs at 615-297-5693.

## Where to Get Help

Active duty military personnel with questions or concerns about their service in the Persian Gulf region - contact your commanding officer or call the Department of Defense (DOD) Gulf War Veterans' Hotline (**1-800-796-9699**) for an examination.

Gulf War 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 Gulf War Registry examination will be offered. Treatment will be provided to eligible veterans. The VA Gulf War Information Helpline can also provide the latest information and assistance. The toll-free telephone number is **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Gulf War veterans in need of marital/family counseling - contact the nearest VA medical center or VA vet center. For additional information, call the Gulf War Information Helpline at **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Gulf War veterans seeking disability compensation for illnesses incurred in or aggravated by military service - contact a Veterans Benefits Counselor at the nearest VA regional office or health care facility at **1-800-827-1000**, or call the VA Gulf War Information Helpline at **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Gulf War veterans seeking participation for their spouses or children in the VA-funded health examination program for spouses and children - call

the VA Gulf War Information Helpline at **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Veterans interested in the alternative self-funded examination for spouses or children - contact the Gulf War Registry Coordinator at the nearest VA medical center for forms and information.

Gulf War 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 at **1-800-827-1000** or call the VA Gulf War Information Helpline at **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Anyone with first-hand information about "incidents" that occurred in the Southwest Asia theater of operations during the Gulf War that may be related to health problems experienced by military personnel who served in the War - call the DoD "Incidents" Hotline at **1-800-472-6719**.

For additional information about VA's program initiatives, see VA's Gulf War veterans' illnesses home page at **<http://www.va.gov/gulf.htm>**.

Gulf War veterans who encounter difficulties at a VA medical facility can contact the "**patient advocate**" at that facility for assistance in resolving the problem.

Representatives of veterans service organizations, including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Disabled American Veterans, etc., may also be very helpful to Gulf War veterans, especially veterans who are seeking disability compensation.

# Gulf War Review



## Department of Veterans Affairs

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