



OPERATIONS IRAQI FREEDOM/

ENDURING FREEDOM REVIEW

Vol. 1, No. 2 Information for Veterans Who Served in Iraq and Afghanistan and Their Families June 2004

VA Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi Speaks About Veterans of the War on Terrorism

Every VA employee has an obligation to ensure that each veteran who is wounded, injured, or ill from training for, preparing for, or fighting the war against terror receives priority service. The men and women who embody our department now have the rarest of opportunities: an important chance to make a good first impression. Our actions over the next few months will define our department for the lifetime of the veterans who are now returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.



Anthony J. Principi
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

VA Expands Outreach to Veterans

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is expanding its efforts to reach veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to make sure that they are aware of the many benefits they have earned.

On May 10, 2004, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi began sending a personal letter to more than 150,000 veterans of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom who have recently separated from the military, to thank them for their service and to remind them of their eligibility for VA health care and other benefits.

“I want these men and women to know that we are grateful for their service to our country,” Principi said. “Those who served in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places around the world have risked their lives to make America more secure. One of the ways the nation shows its gratitude is by ensuring veterans receive the benefits they deserve.” Principi’s letter includes brochures, telephone numbers, and links to Web pages at www.va.gov, that contain more details about VA benefits, including an opportunity to apply for benefits online.

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Newsletter Sent to 136,000+ Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom Veterans; Welcome New Readers

Welcome new readers. Welcome home!! We are happy to tell you about some of the benefits and services that VA can provide you. This is the second issue of the Iraqi Freedom/Enduring Freedom Review newsletter and the first issue to be directly mailed to large numbers of recently returned Gulf War and Afghanistan veterans. Approximately 180,000 copies of the first issue were printed and distributed to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers, VA Regional offices, Vet Centers, and other interested groups and individuals. You can get the back issue and future editions at www.va.gov/gulfwar.

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VA Expands Outreach to Veterans

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As Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans continue to leave the active duty military, VA will mail additional letters each month from the Secretary.

VA also regularly mails information packets to all service members separating from the military to remind them of eligibility for basic VA benefits, such as VA-guaranteed home loans and education benefits. In addition, there are provisions in these programs for reservists and National Guard members. More information about all VA benefits can be found at VA's Web site, at www.va.gov.

Additional outreach to those recently deployed to combat theaters also alerts them to special eligibility that increases their access to health care for two years after separation from the military for illnesses and injuries that may be the result of military service. For those medical problems, VA waives copayments for inpatient and outpatient care.

Goal: Smooth Transition

VA focuses special attention on those with service-related disabilities. The department's goal is a seamless transition from military to VA services, with claims for financial benefits receiving expedited processing. For the seriously wounded, VA has counselors working at the bedsides of patients in military hospitals with the largest numbers of casualties to begin benefit applications before they leave the military.

In addition, VA social service personnel work at these military facilities to plan health care coordination as service members move from military to VA care. This helps ensure a smooth transition to a VA hospital or clinic near the veteran's intended residence for continuity of medical care.

In partnership with state and local government benefits, counselors and veterans service organization representatives, VA annually briefs about 200,000 service members around the world before discharge to help prepare them for civilian transition and VA benefits. It operates benefits offices at 133 military installations to help service members with conditions arising during service preparation to begin receiving VA compensation promptly after discharge.

"VA has learned many lessons since the Gulf War in 1991 and other conflicts, which will ensure that this newest generation of war veterans receives the health care and assistance they deserve when they return to civilian life," said Principi.

Newsletter Sent to 136,000+ Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom Veterans; Welcome New Readers *(Continued from page 1)*

Some readers may be interested in seeing some of the issues of the "Gulf War Review," which we primarily publish for veterans of the 1991 Gulf War. They can be accessed at the Web site mentioned above, are available from the Environmental Agents Service (EAS), and can be obtained from the Environmental Health Coordinators at many VA medical centers. The address for the EAS is: **Environmental Agents Service (131), ATTN: GWR, VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20420**. Thirty-four issues of the Gulf War Review, originally known as the Persian Gulf Review, have been published to date.

While military personnel in Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF) faced many of the same exposures and potential hazards as Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, there also were significant differences. In view of these differences, we decided that a separate publication that focused on the health and benefit concerns of OIF and OEF veterans was important. Now we have a mailing list of separated OIF and OEF military personnel that allows us to directly contact many of the most recent veterans. Because many of the readers are new to this publication, we have repeated some of the information included in the premiere issue, dated December 2003. We apologize to those of you who read some similar articles previously; however, there is a great deal of new information as well!

We also publish two other newsletters: the Agent Orange Review, founded in 1982, and the Ionizing Radiation Review, which just began this year, first issue: February 2004, newsletters. Requests for these publications can be sent to EAS at the above highlighted address. (Substitute AOR or IRR in the attention line, as appropriate.) Forty-one issues of the Agent Orange Review and a single issue of the Ionizing Radiation Review have been released to date.

How Returning Veterans are Using VA Health Care

The following two articles analyze VA health care use by veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. A separate article regarding usage just by women veterans of these military conflicts is also provided.

Report on VA Health Care Use by Iraqi Freedom Veterans

This article summarizes a recent VA report on VA health care provided to Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans, who have separated from military service.

Among 139,778 veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom who have separated from active military duty, 15% (21,021) have sought health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) since they were deployed. Approximately 13,683 health care visits were made by Iraqi Freedom veterans, which represents a workload of about 87 medical visits for each of the VA's 158 hospitals during a one month period. About 58 percent of Iraqi Freedom veterans who received VA health care have been members of the Reserve or National Guard.

Veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom have presented to VA with a wide range of both medical and psychological conditions, covering a broad range of medical diagnoses. The most common health problems of veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom have been musculoskeletal problems, mostly joint and back disorders, and dental problems.

The type of diagnoses of these 21,021 veterans has not changed much since earlier analyses of Iraqi Freedom veterans who had received VA health care. No particular health problem stands out among Iraqi Freedom veterans at present. Consequently, recommendations cannot be provided for particular testing or evaluation; these war veterans should be assessed individually to identify all outstanding health problems.

It is important to note that this analysis includes only those veterans who received care from VA. Many veterans obtain their medical care elsewhere. Those who have been diagnosed by VA are not necessarily representative of all OIF or OEF veterans. Only carefully designed and well executed scientific studies can reveal if these veterans are at increased risk for illnesses or diseases and, if so, what these conditions are.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the health care part of VA, will continue to monitor the health status of recent Iraqi war veterans using updated deployment lists provided by the Department of Defense to ensure that VA tailors its health care and disability programs to meet the needs of this newest generation of war veterans.

Database of VA Health Care for Operation Enduring Freedom Veterans

This article summarizes a recent VA report of VA health care by Operation Enduring Freedom veterans.

Among 43,622 veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom who have separated from active military duty, 9.9% (4,306) have sought health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) since deployment. The 9.9% rate of VA health care utilization among veterans of the war in Afghanistan is lower than the 15% rate of VA health care

usage among a much larger population of 139,778 Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans who have separated from active duty.

While Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom have come to VA with a wide range of both medical and psychological conditions, it is important to note that veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom have experienced about the same kinds of health problems since returning to the United States even though they served in separate theaters of conflict.

The report concluded that because veterans of the conflicts in either Afghanistan or Iraq are coming to VA with a wide range of diagnoses, they should be assessed individually for all outstanding health problems.

It is important to note that this analysis includes only those veterans who received care from VA. Many veterans obtain their medical care elsewhere. Those who have been diagnosed by VA are not necessarily typical of OIF or OEF veterans. Only carefully designed and well executed scientific studies can reveal if these veterans are at increased risk for illnesses or diseases and, if so, what these conditions are.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA), VA's medical agency, will continue to monitor the health status of both Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom veterans using updated deployment lists provided by DoD to ensure that VA tailors its health care programs to meet the needs of this newest generation of war veterans.

Information About Women Veterans of Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom

This article summarizes a recent report of VA health care by Operations Iraqi Freedom/Enduring Freedom women veterans. (Women are also included in the two reports above.)

Among 15,291 women veterans who served in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom and have since separated from active duty, 17.0% (2,603) have received health care from the VA. A higher percentage of female Iraqi Freedom veterans (18.4%) have sought health care from VA than Enduring Freedom veterans (11.5%); however, 1,309 individual women (9%) had served in both military operations.

A slightly higher percentage of separated women veterans have sought health care from VA than the overall population of veterans of both Operation Iraqi Freedom (18% vs. 14%) and Enduring Freedom (12% vs. 9%). Higher health care utilization among women is a common finding among other populations of military personnel and civilians.

About 88% of women Enduring Freedom veterans and 60% of women Iraqi veterans who received VA care have been members of the Reserve/National Guard.

Like men, women veterans of recent military conflicts have a wide range of both medical and psychological conditions; the most common conditions have been musculoskeletal ailments, principally joint and back problems.

Compared to the overall population of recent conflict veterans seeking health care from VA, women veterans have had similar health problems since deployment.

It is important to note that this analysis includes only those women veterans who received care from VA. Many veterans obtain their medical care elsewhere. Those who have been diagnosed by VA are not necessarily representative of all OIF or OEF women veterans. Only carefully designed and well executed scientific studies can reveal if these veterans are at increased risk for illnesses or diseases and, if so, what these conditions are.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) will continue to monitor the health status of both Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom veterans using updated deployment lists provided by DoD to ensure that VA tailors its health care and disability programs to meet the needs of this newest generation of war veterans.

VA is Prepared to Help OIF/OEF Veterans

This article briefly describes some of the key steps that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has taken to prepare to take care of veterans from Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF). VA has developed many excellent programs in the anticipation of the needs of veterans from the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of these were based on our experience treating veterans from the first Gulf War and even before that, treating veterans from the Vietnam War.

Improvements in Veterans Health Care Eligibility

VA has supported new eligibility rules that provide reservists and active duty personnel who served in a designated combat zone such as Iraq or Afghanistan with 2 years of free health care from VA. This program now offers streamlined access to health care for recently separated combat veterans. Information is summarized in the brochure “**Special VA Health Care Eligibility for Veterans Who Served in Combat Theaters,**” available on line at www.va.gov/environagents.

Combat Veteran Health Status Surveillance

Today we can monitor the overall health status of combat veterans very well using VA’s electronic inpatient and outpatient medical records. This surveillance

summarizes *every single VA health care visit* by veterans, including all medical diagnoses.

We are developing a new Clinical Reminder (part of VA’s computerized reminder system) to assist VA primary care clinicians in providing timely and appropriate medical and mental health care to new combat veterans.

Medical Education Regarding Immediate Health Care Needs for Combat Veterans

To better prepare VA health professionals for the immediate health concerns of OIF and OEF veterans, in March 2003, VA developed a special program called “Caring for the War Wounded,” which was broadcast over the VA Knowledge Network satellite broadcast system. It included VA experts on treatments for traumatic injuries; chemical warfare agent health effects; infectious diseases; radiological health effects; and post-deployment readjustment health concerns. The programs were made into a new Veterans Health Initiative (VHI) independent study guide, also called “Caring for the War Wounded,” which is available to all VA health care providers on VA’s Intranet at vaww.va.gov/VHI/ and on the Internet at www.va.gov/vhi/.

New Clinical Guidelines for Combat Veteran Health Care

In collaboration with the Department of Defense (DoD), VA developed two Clinical Practice Guidelines on combat veteran health issues, including one general guideline to post-deployment health, and a second dealing with unexplained pain and fatigue. The guidelines give providers the best medical evidence for diagnoses and treatment. They are highly recommended for the evaluation and care of *all* returning combat veterans, including OIF and OEF veterans. The new guidelines are available on line at www.va.gov/environagents, under the heading “Environmental Health Clinicians.”

New Specialized Combat Veteran Health Care Program

In 2001, VA established two new War Related Illness and Injury Study Centers (WRIISCs) at the VA medical centers in Washington, DC, and East Orange, NJ. These centers are currently providing specialized health care for combat veterans from all deployments who experience difficult to diagnose but disabling illnesses. The centers are addressing concerns about unexplained illnesses that are seen after all deployments, including OIF, and are building on our understanding of these illnesses. More information is available online at www.va.gov/environagents under the heading “WRIISC Referral Eligibility Information.”

Expanded Education on Combat Health Care for VA Providers

In addition to the programs already described, VA has developed a VHI Independent Study Guide for VA health care providers called "A Guide to Gulf War Veterans Health." Although this guide were originally on health care for combat veterans from the 1991 Gulf War, it is also very relevant for OIF and OEF combat veterans because many of the hazardous exposures are the same. It was designed to be useful for clinicians, veterans, and their families. It is available in print, on a CD ROM, and also on the Web at www.va.gov/gulfwar, under the heading Veterans Health Initiative (VHI) Gulf War.

Outreach to Combat Veterans

VA has new informational products to offer combat veterans and their families. One new brochure is called "Health Care and Assistance for U.S. Veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom," on basic health issues for that deployment. It is available on our Web site at www.va.gov/environagents.

In addition, in collaboration with DoD, VA published and distributed one million copies of a short new brochure called "A Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel." This brochure does a tremendous job of summarizing health care and other benefits available to this special population of combat veterans upon their return to civilian life. It is available online at www.va.gov/environagents near the bottom of the page.

Special Depleted Uranium (DU) Program

OIF veterans concerned about possible adverse health effects of exposure to depleted uranium (DU) can be evaluated using a special DU exposure protocol that VA began after the 1991 Gulf War. See www.va.gov/environagents.

Environmental Health Coordinators Can Help OIF/OEF Veterans

Veterans of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom can expect help from the Environmental Health Coordinator at their nearest VA medical center. These employees, previously known as Veterans' Registry Coordinators or Gulf War Registry Coordinators, are responsible for scheduling appointments (generally within 30 days of the requested date), monitoring field station compliance with VA regulations, reviewing records for accuracy and completeness, and collecting certain data for reporting purposes.

These coordinators are an important part of a team with the Environmental Health Clinicians at nearly every

VA medical center. The coordinators may be the first and last persons that the veteran has contact with during his or her outpatient visit, and can play a major role in determining whether veterans examined at a VA health care center leave with a positive or negative image of VA.

VA's Commitment on Service to Returning Veterans

Under Secretary for Health Robert H. Roswell, M.D.: A service member separating from military service and seeking health care through VA today will have the benefit of VA's decade-long experience with Gulf War health issues as well as the President's commitment to improving VA/DoD collaboration. VA has successfully adapted many existing programs, improved outreach, improved clinical care through practice guidelines and educational efforts, and improved VA health provider's access to DoD health records. Secretary Principi re-emphasized VA's commitment to returning combat veterans in a letter to all employees last August, in which he reminded us that every VA employee has an obligation to ensure that every veteran who is wounded, injured, or ill from training for, preparing for, or fighting our war on terror receives priority service. In his words, "We will have failed to meet our very reason to exist as a Department if a veteran is poorly served." I agree with that...VA will continue to improve services and coordination to ensure that the needs of these service members are met.*

*On April 5, 2004, Dr. Roswell resigned from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) after a distinguished career of 28 years at VA. Dr. Jonathan B. Perlin, VA's Deputy Under Secretary for Health assumed the duties of Acting Under Secretary pending action by a national search committee. Before being appointed as head of the Veterans Health Administration where he lead the nation's largest integrated VA's health care program, Dr. Roswell held a number of top management positions in VA (both in headquarters and in the field), including Executive Director, Persian Gulf Veterans Coordinating Board, 1994-99. The Board, which coordinated Gulf War activities within the Executive Branch of the Federal Government, was jointly chaired by the Secretaries of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and Health and Human Services.

In August 1992, Dr. Roswell, as Associate Deputy Chief Medical Director, took the initial steps to start the Gulf War Registry pending the passage of legislation then under consideration by Congress. He was a national spokesperson for VA on Gulf War health issues before many of today's programs were in place.

About the “Review”

The “Operations Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom Review” is produced by VA’s Environmental Agents Service (EAS) to provide information about the long-term health concerns of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom veterans, their families, and others interested in the possible long-term health consequences of military service in these recent military operations. The “Review” describes actions by VA and other Federal departments and agencies to respond to these concerns. For other issues of this newsletter, and related information regarding the current conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, please see our Web site at www.va.gov/gulfwar.

EAS anticipates publication once or twice a year, depending on the amount of news on this subject and on budgetary considerations. This issue was completed in early April 2004 but postponed for budgetary reasons, and then revised in late June. It does not include developments that occurred after that time.

Comments, questions, and suggestions for future issues are encouraged and can be sent to the OIF/OEF Review, 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. Supplies are limited. Please specify the quantity and issue date requested.

Two-Year Rule Helps Recent Combat Theater Veterans Get Health Care

This article and the questions and answers that follow were printed in Volume 1, Number 1, the first issue of the newsletter. We are repeating this information (with some minor clarifications) to help first-time readers.

Military personnel who recently served in a combat zone or in an area of hostilities comparable to that seen during combat are now eligible for 2 years of free medical care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for many conditions.

“We are able to help the newest generation of combat veterans serving in Afghanistan and engaged in the war against terrorism in ways not available to previous generations of veterans,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi.

In the past, veterans have had to prove that a medical problem is connected to their military service to receive

free VA care for that condition, or they must have relatively low incomes. Since November 11, 1998, however, VA has been authorized to provide free medical care for veterans serving in a combat theater within 2 years after leaving active duty. Eligible veterans must have served in a combat zone or in an area and during a period of comparable hostilities. They do not have to prove either a service-connection for their health care problems or that they have low incomes. Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom veterans are the first large group of veterans to benefit from this policy change.

“The wounds of military conflicts are not always obvious,” said Principi. “We must be ready to assist combat veterans who have medical problems that are unexplained or difficult to diagnose.”

The benefit does not cover treatment for medical problems clearly unrelated to military service, such as care for common colds, injuries from accidents that happened after discharge from active duty, and disorders that existed before the person joined the military.

How It Works

To receive free medical care, veterans must be able to show that they served since November 11, 1998, in a theater of combat operations or in combat against a hostile force. The coverage lasts for 2 years after discharge from active duty. It applies to VA hospital care, outpatient services, and nursing home care. “National Guard and Reserve personnel, who serve alongside their active duty comrades in combat will, in most cases, be eligible,” said Dr. Robert Roswell, then VA’s Under Secretary for Health.

After 2 years, these veterans will be subject to the same eligibility and enrollment rules as other veterans.

“This benefit builds upon the lessons learned from the undiagnosed illnesses of Gulf War veterans and Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange,” said Principi. “Combat veterans should not wait for medical care while we weigh the evidence linking their problems to military service.”

Questions & Answers About the Two-Year Rule for Combat Theater Veterans

Who is eligible for this care?

The care is available to veterans who served on active duty in a theater of combat operations in a period of war, after the Gulf War or in combat against a hostile force during “a period of hostilities” after November 11, 1998, in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Under Secretary for Health.

How does this help veterans?

It provides needed medical care for 2 years to veterans who served in a combat theater without requiring them to make a copayment for the care they receive, even without proof that their injury or illness was caused or worsened by their military service.

What type of injuries and illnesses does this cover?

VA appreciates that many wounds are not always obvious and that unexplained or difficult to diagnose illnesses are often associated with military conflict. This benefit covers all illnesses and injuries except those clearly unrelated to military service, such as a common cold, injuries from accidents after discharge, or disorders that people had before joining the military.

How is this different from previous policy?

The key distinction is that these veterans will be provided free medical care immediately upon separation and for a period of 2 years. They need not prove their injury or illness was connected to their service or show that they have a relatively low income or other grounds for eligibility. Previously, many of these veterans would be liable for a copayment until their illness or injury had been evaluated by VA and ruled to be a service-connected disability.

Under what authority can VA offer this care?

VA's policy is in accordance with the authority granted in section 102 of Public Law 105-368 as codified in Section 1710(e)(1)(D) of Title 38 of the United States Code.

Is this limited to hospital care?

No. The policy includes other appropriate medical care and nursing home care as well.

What is the effective date for establishing the 2-year time period?

The 2-year time period begins when the military member is separated or retires from active duty. (Some veterans with adverse discharges may not qualify for this benefit.)

Does receipt of care establish proof of a service connected disability rating?

No. The care is designed to meet the medical needs of combat veterans for 2 years after they leave active

duty. It is expected that during this time veterans' claims for disability compensation for these injuries, illnesses, or medical conditions will be adjudicated (approved or denied by VA). If veterans' claims are approved as service connected, they will be placed in the appropriate priority group and continue to receive their care without a copayment. If their claim is disapproved, they may still be able to receive care, but they may be required to make a copayment for the services.

Does the 2-year rule include members of the National Guard and Reserve forces?

Yes. The policy also applies to National Guard and Reserve personnel who were activated and served in a theater of combat or in combat against a hostile force. Members of the Guard and Reserve forces must be ordered to active duty by a Federal declaration, serve the full period for which they were called or ordered to active duty, and be released, discharged, or retired under conditions other than dishonorable.

How does VA define "hostilities?"

"Hostilities" is defined broadly as conflict in which the members of the Armed Forces are subjected to danger comparable to the danger they would face in a period of war. This definition includes some areas in the world where U.S. service members are deployed in addition to OIF and OEF. To determine whether a period of hostilities is within the scope of this special authority, VA relies upon the same legal authority and criteria used to determine eligibility for VA Readjustment Counseling Service (the VA "Vet Center" program).

What happens to these veterans after the 2 years are up?

After 2 years, a veteran's copayment status will depend on whether their illness, injury, or medical condition was officially found by VA to be service-connected or whether the veteran is otherwise qualified for care. He or she will be enrolled in the appropriate priority group for VA health care.

Veterans will be enrolled to the extent appropriations allow. For information regarding enrollment, see www.va.gov/elig/, contact the nearest VA health care facility, or call the VA Health Benefits Service Center at **1-877-222-8387**.

How to Get Disability Compensation

Like all veterans, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom veterans are eligible for monthly payments, called disability compensation, from VA if they are suffering with service-connected illnesses or injuries. The disability must have been incurred or aggravated during active military service. Furthermore, the service of the veteran must have been terminated from military service through separation or discharge under conditions that were other than dishonorable.

Disability compensation varies according to the degree of disability and the number of dependents. Benefits are not subject to Federal or state income tax. The receipt of military retirement pay, disability severance pay, and separation incentive payments known as SSB and VSI (Special Separation Benefits and Voluntary Separation Incentives) also affects the amount of VA compensation paid.

The disability ratings range from 0 to 100 percent (in increments of 10 percent). For example, in 2004, an OIF or OEF veteran with a disability rating of 10 percent receives \$106 a month; a veteran with a disability rating of 50 percent gets \$646; and a veteran who is totally disabled and evaluated at 100 percent receives \$2,239.

Veterans with disability ratings between 30 and 100 percent are also eligible for monthly allowances for a spouse ranging from \$38 to \$127, and for each child, \$19 to \$65. (The amount depends on the disability rating.)

A veteran who is in need of regular aid and attendance of another person, or who is permanently housebound may be entitled to additional benefits. VA must make that determination before the veteran can get these benefits.

Must Apply to Be Considered

Compensation is not automatically provided to the OIF, OEF, or other veterans. VA veterans service representatives (VSR) can provide the necessary application and assist veterans who need help in completing it. VSR's are located at all VA Regional Offices, in VA medical centers, and at most VA clinics. For help in locating a VSR near you, call the following toll-free telephone number: **1-800-827-1000**.

Other Benefits

In addition to the compensation program described above, individual OIF and OEF veterans may be eligible for the full range of other benefits offered by VA, including education and training, vocational rehabilitation, home loan guarantees, life insurance, pension, burial benefits, and more.

To learn more about VA's programs and benefits, veterans and other interested parties can visit the VA home page www.va.gov or call **1-800-827-1000**.

Q's and A's

The "Review" will occasionally include a questions-and-answers section in which VA officials respond to inquiries from readers regarding possible health problems and concerns of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom veterans and their families and about programs initiated by VA and other Federal departments and agencies to help these veterans.

Gary M. Baker, Director, Health Eligibility Center, provided the answers for the following questions about recent combat theater veterans:

Q: Do these veterans have to go through means testing to qualify for the 2-year post discharge program?

A: Yes. These veterans must complete the means test so that VA knows if their financial status exempts them completely from means test copayments or if they will be responsible for the cost of care and medications determined by their provider to be unrelated to their combat/military experience.

Q. For those veterans with non-service connected conditions, assuming that they have some conditions that may be service connected, are they eligible for medications without a co-payment?

A. See answer to question one. VA provides broad latitude for the health care provider to determine which conditions may be related to the veteran's combat/military experience. The guidelines are more generous than the formal requirements for approving a claim for service connection. If the provider determines care possibly related, the veteran is exempted from both means test copayments and medication copayment for the care of that condition.

Q. Are they eligible for dental care?

A. No. No special dental benefits are part of the combat veteran authority. Recently discharged veterans with a service-connected noncompensable dental condition or disability who served on active duty 90 or more days and who apply for VA dental care within 90 days of separation from active duty may receive one-time treatment for dental conditions if the dental condition is shown to have existed at the time of discharge or release and the veteran's discharge certificate does not indicate that the veteran received necessary dental care within a 90-day period prior to discharge or release.

Additional questions should be sent as follows:

Mr. Donald J. Rosenblum

Deputy Director, Environmental Agents Service (131)
ATTN: OIF/OEF REVIEW – Q’s & A’s
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20420.

We will answer as many questions as possible and will not identify the questioner. Questions about personal medical problems are not generally considered appropriate for inclusion in the newsletter.

Benefits and Services for U.S. Military Veterans Living Outside the U.S.

VA provides benefits and services to veterans overseas; however, these benefits and services are provided in a different manner than for veterans who live in the United States.

VA will pay for medical services for treatment of service-connected disabilities for veterans who are living or traveling in foreign countries (Canada and the Philippines excluded). Authorization and payment for medical treatment of service-connected disabilities are completed by our Foreign Medical Program (FMP) located in Denver, Colorado. The FMP address is: P.O. Box 65021, Denver, CO 80206-9021. Veterans living in Canada should contact the VA Center in White River Junction, VT 05009-0001, and veterans living in the Philippines should contact the U. S. VA Office, 2201 Roxas Blvd., Pasay City 1300, Philippines.

VA regional offices are responsible for processing and establishing service-connected conditions, pension ratings, and other benefit programs. Veterans who live in Canada should file a claim with the VA Center in White River Junction, VT, at the address listed in the above paragraph. Veterans living in Mexico, South and Central America, and the Caribbean should file a claim with the Houston Regional Office at 6900 Almeda Road, Houston, TX 77030. Veterans in the Philippines should contact the VA Office at the address listed in the above paragraph. Veterans living overseas in countries not listed above should contact the Pittsburgh Regional Office, 1000 Liberty Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15222.

Veterans and their dependents living overseas can also contact the United States Embassy, the Foreign Benefits Unit (FBU), in the country they are living for assistance. FBU staff can assist veterans and their dependents in filing VA benefit claims and in answering VA benefit questions.

Veterans and their dependents can also find information about VA benefits and services provided overseas on the World Wide Web at: (www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/foreign/index.htm). This Web site provides valuable information about VA’s Foreign Services Program, and it also enables the inquirer to ask questions, receive answers to questions, and apply online for a number of VA benefits.

Readers’ Survey

We are seeking advice and recommendations from all readers. In a future issue of the “Review,” we will report to you regarding the comments we receive. Please send your comments and ideas to Mr. Donald J. Rosenblum, Deputy Director, Environmental Agents Service, ATTN: Gulf War Review, VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20420. You can use this paper or write on your own.

Are you a veteran? _____ Spouse of a veteran? _____
First time reader of this newsletter? _____

How and where did you get this newsletter? _____

What do you think of the “Review”? _____

Does it meet your needs? Why or why not? _____

What changes would you like to see in this publication? Additions? Deletions? _____

Additional comments or suggestions? _____

Thank you for your comments. Please send the completed survey to the above address.

What a Date!!

Saddam Hussein's (Iraqi) troops invaded Kuwait, August 2, 1990.

U.S. troops began deployment in Operation Desert Shield, August 7, 1990.

Coalition Air War began in Operation Desert Storm, January 16, 1991.

One hundred hours ground war fought, February 24-28, 1991.

The first President Bush signed Public Law 10-2-25, establishing August 2, 1990, as official starting date of Persian Gulf War, April 6, 1991.*

Terrorists attacked World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon near Washington, DC, September 11, 2001.

An Executive Order designated Afghanistan as a combat zone as of September 19, 2001.

Operation Iraqi Freedom began, March 20, 2003.

The second President Bush declared major combat operations in Iraq ended May 1, 2003, but fighting continues and the operation is still ongoing.

The Department of Defense still has both Iraq and Afghanistan on the list for receipt of Hostile Fire and Imminent Danger Pay with the ending dates left open.

*The law provides the ending date would be "on the date hereafter prescribed by Presidential proclamation or by law." To date, there has been no law enacted or Presidential proclamation issued.

VA Web Sites Have Information for Gulf War and Afghanistan Veterans

VA Web sites provide a wide range of information about the problems encountered by Gulf War and Afghanistan veterans and the available benefits and services. Start with VA's main Web site at www.va.gov, and see for yourself. If you do not have a personal computer, many libraries have them for public use. The librarians can assist you.

Veterans Benefits Information	www.vba.va.gov/
Information for Iraqi Freedom Veterans	www.va.gov/gulfwar/
Afghanistan Service Information	www.va.gov/environagents/
Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Iraq Veterans	www.ncptsd.org/topics/war.html
VA Health Care Enrollment Information	www.va.gov/elig/
Brochures and Publications, Including: * A Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel * Health Care and Assistance for U.S. Veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom	www.vethealth.cio.med.va.gov/Pubs/Index.htm
Online Benefits Applications	vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp/

Women Veterans Are Eligible for the Same Benefits as Men

MYTH: *Women can't be veterans because they didn't serve in combat.*

FACT: Women who served in the military are veterans and are eligible for the same benefits and services as their male counterparts.

Many women who served their country in military service do not consider themselves veterans because they did not serve in combat. Consequently, they have not applied for benefits and services for which they are entitled.

In fact, in recent years, VA has established a wide range of special services to provide appropriate, timely, and compassionate health care services to women veterans. These include the range of services available to men, as well as, sexual trauma counseling, homeless women veterans programs, victims of domestic violence programs, and reproductive health care, including maternity care, and infertility evaluations.

Each VA medical center has a Women Veterans Program Manager to ensure that women veterans receive the proper attention. For additional information about these and other programs for women veterans, contact the Women Veterans Program Manager at the nearest VA medical center or outpatient clinic or see the VA Web site: www1.va.gov/wvhp.

Where to Get Additional Information and Assistance

Active duty military personnel with questions or concerns about service in Southwest Asia (including Operations Desert Storm, Desert Shield, Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom) - contact your commanding officer or call the Department of Defense (DoD) Gulf War Veterans' Hotline (**1-800-796-9699**) for information. DoD also offers the "**Direct Veterans Hotline**," with the toll-free number **1-800-497-6261**.

Gulf War veterans, including OIF veterans with concerns about their health should contact their nearest VA medical center. The telephone number can be found in your local telephone directory under Department of Veterans Affairs in the "U.S. Government" listings. Medical care is available, and a Gulf War Registry examination is also available on request.

The VA Gulf War Information Helpline can also provide information and assistance. The toll-free telephone number is **1-800-PGWVETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Check our VA Web sites for more Gulf War information on health care and other benefits (including those for Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans) at www.va.gov/gulfwar, www.va.gov/environagents.

Gulf War veterans in need of **marital/family counseling** should contact the nearest VA medical center or VA Vet Center, also listed in your phonebook under Department of Veterans Affairs in the "U.S. Government" listings. For additional information about these programs call the Gulf War Information Helpline at **1-800-PGWVETS (1-800-749-8387)**. Gulf War veterans seeking **disability compensation** for illnesses incurred in or aggravated by military service can 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)**. You can also start a claim online at www.va.gov.

Gulf War veterans interested in learning about the wide range of **benefit programs** administered by VA should 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)**.

Representatives of **veterans service organizations**, including the American Legion (**1-800-433-3318**), Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (**1-800-VFW-1899**), Disabled American Veterans (**1-877-426-2838**), Paralyzed Veterans of America (**1-800-424-8200**), AMVETS (**1-877-726-8387**), Vietnam Veterans of America (**1-800-882-1316**), etc., have been very helpful to Gulf War veterans, especially veterans who are seeking disability compensation. (These organizations are cited as examples. There are many other excellent organizations. VA does not endorse or recommend any one group over another.)

County Veterans Service Officers also have been of great help to many military veterans, including those who served in the Gulf War, who are seeking benefits they earned through their service to the Nation.

For additional **Federal benefit** information, see VA's *Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents* booklet. It is updated annually to reflect changes in laws and policies. It is available for purchase from the U.S. Government Printing Office, Superintendent of Documents, Washington, DC 20402, Web site: bookstore.gpo.gov. VA's World Wide Web pages are updated throughout the year to present the most current information. The VA home page (www.va.gov) contains links to selections on compensation and pension benefits, health care benefits and services, burial and memorial benefits, etc.

Concerns About Mefloquine (Lariam)

During Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom the Department of Defense gave mefloquine (Lariam) to some U.S. service members to protect them against malaria. Mefloquine was not used in Operation Desert Shield or Operation Desert Storm. Mefloquine has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration for protection against malaria, and since the late 1980's it has been widely recommended and used by both military and civilian health care personnel. However, it can cause common mild side effects including vivid dreams and mild psychiatric symptoms.

A number of news reports have suggested that mefloquine has caused more serious effects, including violent and suicidal behavior, and symptoms similar to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Some of these accounts link reports of such behavior to mefloquine use among OIF and OEF veterans, for example, homicides and suicides among five service members returning to Fort Bragg, NC two years ago.

Concerns that mefloquine use might cause violent behavior are not new. A Canadian soldier accused of homicide claimed that taking it during his deployment to Somalia in 1992, caused his violent behavior.

In April 2004, a group of VA physicians and scientists met to discuss responses to this concern. The group

concluded that VA needed a well-grounded response to the concerns about possible long-term health effects and disability among veterans from taking mefloquine. In particular, VA health care providers need concise and accurate medical information about mefloquine health effects to answer questions and concerns of veterans returning from deployment in Southwest Asia. The group conducted a literature review of the numerous reports, reviews, surveys, etc.

On June 23, 2004, VA Central Office sent to all VA medical centers and other interested parties an Under Secretary for Health's Information Letter, entitled Possible Long-Term Health Effects from the Malarial Prophylaxis Mefloquine (Lariam), which summarized the scientific literature. For additional information, see the Information Letter on our Web site: www.va.gov/EnvironAgents.

Leading VA scientists do not anticipate that this medication, which has been administered millions of times during the past two decades, will be a serious long-term problem for OIF or OEF veterans. In particular, there is no scientific evidence that Lariam use can cause new health problems after a veteran stopped taking this drug. However, if you are an OIF or OEF veteran and have any concerns about mefloquine, you are encouraged to contact the nearest VA medical center for an appointment.

**OPERATIONS IRAQI
FREEDOM/
ENDURING FREEDOM REVIEW**
*Information for Veterans Who
Served in Iraq and Afghanistan
and Their Families*
June 2004

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