

Vital Insights To Optimize Veteran Health Care

By Brian Hayes, MD, MPH, MSS

Associate Chief of Staff

VA Northern California Health care System

I am honored to share some thoughts with you today as the son of a Veteran, a Veteran myself, as a VA Physician and one who has a family member who is a wounded warrior.

I am also honored to serve in the VA under the leadership of General Eric K. Shinseki, US Army retired our Secretary of Veterans Affairs. I have incorporated some of his thoughts into my talk today as a fellow brother in arms who is passionate about Veterans.

As the son of a Veteran:

My father served 29 years in the US Army with combat tours in Korea and Vietnam. He did not talk much about his time there. I guess because he had ten children to raise and he wanted to get on with his life. I remember wearing his “Hell Hat” as he called it when playing GI Joe as a child and have it with me today to share with you. It is an Army green boony cap with some important phrases embroidered into it:

The power is here

What’s happening

I had a dream

And You don't know do ya!

And to be honest with you, I didn't know. Only recently has he shared some of his experiences from the wars and I think that is to help me take better care of those who came back.

My dad was a history major in college and he made sure I was well schooled in it. He also wanted to ensure I knew the vital role our Veterans have played and continue to play in protecting all that we as Americans hold dear .

And as you all know, throughout our history, Americans have embraced and aspired to live up to our great national declaration: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

Since 1776, Americans like my father have been called on to safeguard these principles through their service in uniform. Each year, Veterans Day is set aside for us to pause and reflect, to recall and to recognize, and to honor and celebrate the service and sacrifices of those who, for 238 years, have shouldered the immense responsibility of defending our freedom. Through these annual observances, we also rededicate ourselves to fulfilling President Abraham Lincoln's charge to all Americans to care for those "who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan."

As a veteran myself:

I learned that scars are cool. They are like the cover of a fascinating book or the label on a great bottle of wine. Each scar has a story and most veterans like to talk about them.

So do not be shy to ask a wounded warrior or Veteran about those scars whether it be a bad burn or a missing limb, most are honored to tell their story to both young and old. They much prefer that than being ignored, shunned or watching an inquisitive child be turned away by an embarrassed parent.

Never forget, Veterans are awesome. They have been Presidents of our great nation, served in congress, made vital judgments from the Judicial bench, led corporations and have even walked on the Moon. In fact, every person who has ever earned the Medal of Honor is a Veteran!

Every Veteran lived by core values when they served and they do not hang those up when they hang up the uniform. In the AF, Integrity, serve before self and excellence in all I did guided me thru 22 years and continues to guide me today.

Veterans become part of another family by virtue of their service:

The Battle of Agincourt was dramatized by [William Shakespeare](#) in *Henry V* featuring the [St. Crispin's Day Speech](#) in which Henry inspired his much outnumbered

English forces to fight the French saying "the fewer men, the greater share of honour".

King Henry V: "And Crispin Crispian (October 25) shall ne'er go by from this day until the ending of the world but we in it shall be remembered. We few, we happy few, we band of brothers, For he today who sheds his blood with me shall be my brother, Be he ne'er so vile, this day shall gentle his condition, and gentlemen in England now abed shall think themselves accursed they were not here, and hold their manhood's cheap whilst any speaks, that fought with us upon St. Crispin's day."

Veterans like my nephew who I will tell you about shortly live on so the memory of their fallen brothers lives on. For my nephew knows if he dies, his fallen comrades memories die too. For some of the men and women he served with did not come from supportive families who would remember them.

Veterans like all of us find their greatest happiness when they serve others. Service does not end when we leave the service. One of the greatest gifts our Veteran service organizations can give our Veterans is to guide them to their educational benefits and find a job they love so they can continue to inspire Americans throughout the ages.

When I was working on my Preventive Medicine and Public health degree at Harvard, I learned the greatest single determinant of a person's health was not whether or not

they smoked, were overweight, or had a family history of medical problems but was their socioeconomic status. That's why education and job assistance are among the best health benefits the VA provides.

The other thing I learned was about social capital and I want to spend a few minutes talking with you about it, because you all are earning social capital right now.

What is social capital? It's having a network of personal friends and belonging to supportive groups where you build personal relationships.

If you have this social capital then you are much more likely to live longer, live happier, and live a healthier life.

Studies have shown that people with social capital are at lower risk for high blood pressure, strokes, heart attacks, and suicide.

As you recall, our University of Best Practices is committed to preventing heart attacks, strokes and diabetes complications so the social capital you build today will directly support our mission.

A great example of this is an Italian community that moved to the USA years ago but kept their community ties intact after settling in the Northeastern US.

Scientists were intrigued by the fact that these people lived longer, healthier lives when compared to neighboring towns.

When they studied the town, they found these people had a phenomenal network of support.

For example, if someone lost their job or was ill, there was always someone there to help out.

They woke up every day knowing that no matter what happens, they had family or friends who were ready to take care of them.

This social capital decreased their daily stress level and likewise their blood pressure, risk of stroke, heart attack and suicide.

To reap the benefits of social capital, you need to know the support is there so your daily stress level is less.

Thru the DOD, the VA and wonderful communities like ours, the support is there. We just need to make sure everyone knows it.

Social capital is like money in the bank—you make deposits when you help other people and take withdrawals when you need help.

You may have experienced this when you did something nice for someone and they replied "I owe you one."

The movie "Pay it Forward" was also based on this idea of passing good deeds on to the next person.

The bottom line is each of us should know someone we can call when we need help.

I suggest a few ways to ensure the support is there. If you must drink, don't drink alone...build that social capital.

If you must smoke, don't smoke alone...that's why they invented smoking areas. We don't want you sitting in your car puffing on a cigarette alone when you can be building that social capital with your smoking buddies.

That way when you are in the hospital years from now with lung cancer, you'll have plenty of friends to support you.

Above all, be nice to people, build that social capital so it's there when you need it.

Dr Kawachi, one of my Professors at Harvard wrote, "Loneliness kills...Social connectedness is among the most important predictors of health and independence as we age—almost as strong as not smoking or being overweight."

Another Harvard Professor, Dr Berkman wrote, "Social isolation may create a chronically stressful condition to which the organism responds by aging faster...We as human beings are not meant to live solitary lives...talking, touching, and relating to others is essential to our well-being."

So when we get together for these meetings and as you go back to work and home later today, remember the importance of social capital and invest in those supportive relationships that are so important to living a fulfilling healthy life.

On a humorous note, one of my classmates asked me how I could be in the military and be a preventive medicine physician.

I simply stated, "Killing the enemy before he can kill you is the best preventive medicine I know."

Years later, I was selected to Command David Grant Medical Center here in Northern California, the nation's top AF Medical Center and the most successful partnership with the VA our country has ever seen.

Within those hallowed walls, we cared and continue to care for our nation's most deserving, those military warriors and veterans who swore an oath to defend our country with their lives, and their families' who served with them.

They are our national treasure, truly deserving of the best care anywhere.

Thru a unique partnership, the VA of Northern California Health Care System committed itself to march lock step with the Air Force medics to care for those who have borne the brunt of battle, and for their widow and orphan.

Together we ensure there will always be a well-trained medic on the battlefield, in the trauma center in Afghanistan, on board every aeromedical evacuation mission that flies overhead and at the bedside of every patient at Travis AFB.

At night, you can see the navigational beacon atop the old hospital on the hill flashing bright green and white in to the night sky beckoning our warriors to come home. My father still recalls that hospital as he came home from Korea and Vietnam.

I have always found it fitting that Veterans Day should be celebrated in the same month as Thanksgiving. For what could we be more thankful for than to live in a country where men and women courageously fight for those principles we hold so dear.

As a VA Physician:

I have learned that it is truly an honor and pleasure to care for our nations veterans.

I have also learned that most of our Veterans do not get their health care thru the VA. Only about 18% of

Veterans utilize the VA for all their health care needs.

In addition, the state of California has the largest percentage and largest number of veterans living in the state. Approximately 9% of our nations Veterans (roughly 2 million of them) live in the Golden Bear state.

More importantly, many of our Veterans were exposed to environmental hazards during their military service which can adversely impact their long term health.

It is vital that health care teams ask about these potential exposures when caring for Veterans. The VA developed this Military Health History Pocket card for Clinicians so that any health care professional can know what questions to ask and where to go for answers. They are water proof, durable and can be used as a dressing so I highly recommend carrying one whenever you are caring for patients. You never know when you may have to treat a sucking chest wound and these cards and three pieces of duct tape work great.

Since our Right Care Capital Region UBP team is focusing its efforts to prevent heart attacks, strokes and diabetes complications, I want to focus on one

exposure today that has been linked to all three of these diseases....Agent Orange.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) released its most recent report on Agent Orange titled “Veterans and Agent Orange: Update 2012” on December 3, 2013.

From 1962 to 1971, US military sprayed herbicides over Vietnam to strip the thick jungle canopy that could conceal opposition forces, to destroy crops that those forces might depend on, and to clear tall grasses and bushes from the perimeters of US base camps and outlying fire-support bases.

Because of continuing uncertainty about the long term health effects of the sprayed herbicides on Vietnam veterans, Congress passed the Agent Orange Act of 1991.

The legislation directed the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to request the IOM to perform a comprehensive evaluation of scientific and medical information regarding the health effects of exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides used in Vietnam.

Veterans and Agent Orange: Update 2012 is the ninth congressionally mandated biennial update. The committee reviewed all relevant literature published between October 2010 and September 2011 and integrated the new findings with the previously

assembled epidemiological data on each health outcome assessed with respect to exposure to the chemicals constituting the herbicides used in Vietnam, including the dioxin contaminant 2,3,7,8-TCDD.

The single new conclusion was that there is limited or suggestive evidence of a scientifically meaningful association of stroke with exposure to the chemicals in question.

You can read more at:

<http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2013/Veterans-and-Agent-Orange-Update-2012.aspx#sthash.GI8VxNU8.dpuf>

VA has already recognized certain cancers and other health problems as presumptive diseases associated with exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service. Veterans and their survivors may be eligible for benefits for these diseases.

AL Amyloidosis

Chronic B-cell Leukemias

Chloracne (or similar acneform disease)

Diabetes Mellitus Type 2

Hodgkin's Disease

Ischemic Heart Disease

Multiple Myeloma

Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma

Parkinson's Disease

Peripheral Neuropathy, Early-Onset

Porphyria Cutanea Tarda

Prostate Cancer

Respiratory Cancers (includes lung cancer) Cancers of the lung, larynx, trachea, and bronchus

Soft Tissue Sarcomas (other than osteosarcoma, chondrosarcoma, Kaposi's sarcoma, or mesothelioma)

Spina Bifida in offspring of exposed people

There is also limited or suggestive evidence of an association between Agent Orange exposure and hypertension which is currently undergoing further research.

If you identify a Veteran with any of these diseases than please use this handy card to guide them to great resources in the VA where they can obtain additional support and assistance.

and one who has a family member who is a wounded warrior:

As fellow Americans, we recognize and respect the sacrifices of our brave men and women warriors and the tremendous debt we owe those who have been injured or killed.

I have seen that sacrifice first hand when I visited my nephew, SSgt Joshua Cope after a roadside bomb took off both his legs above the knee shortly before Veterans Day in 2006.

Our medics do an awesome job of saving warriors in the field:

In Vietnam, 5/8 of seriously injured survived (63%)

Today 7/8 seriously injured survive (88%)

Those who made it to our Trauma Center in Balad, Iraq and our Trauma center today in Bagram Afghanistan have a 98% survival rate!

The best survival rate the world has ever seen.

It was those numbers I reflected on when my sister called me in the middle of the night years ago asking me to call Balad to see how her son was doing...

It is incumbent on us to have a system of care which maximizes these survivors' recovery and returns them to their American mainstream as soon as possible.

I am often asked how I felt when I visited my nephew SSgt Joshua Cope 8 years ago at Walter Reed Medical Center in

Wash DC after he had sacrificed both his legs for his country while fighting in Iraq.

As many of you know, there are a tremendous amount of emotions we feel whenever we see one of our wounded Veterans.

One person made the mistake of saying, “don’t you feel pity for them?” I almost put my boot up... where a colonoscope should go. For God knows, it is never pity.

No ladies and gentleman, it is an eternal debt of gratitude, a forever thankfulness that this Veteran did so much for this country, one that reminds us that we are forever in their debt for what they have done, for what they have endured, and what they exemplify daily to everyone one of us...the unconquerable American spirit and the price of freedom!

What do I mean by a debt of gratitude?

The movie Saving Private Ryan perhaps portrays it best.

As you may recall, Captain John Miller leads a patrol during WW II to locate and save Private Ryan, a soldier whose brothers had all been killed and he was the only son left to his mother who was grieving in the States. They were successful in saving him , but died in the effort.

As Captain Miller is dying, he tells Private Ryan to make his life count and instructs him to ”earn this—earn it.”

Conclusion:

Today, less than one percent of our population bears the responsibility of our national defense, and just over seven percent of all Americans living today have worn our Nation's uniforms. All of us must be dedicated to serving Veterans of every generation with commitment, respect, and advocacy equal to their service and sacrifice. This is our noble mission, and a sacred duty.

As we mend bodies and spirits, deliver life-enhancing and life-saving benefits, let us take pride in our Nation's willingness to fulfill its obligations for services already rendered, down payments already made, and wellness already sacrificed by Veterans to whom we owe so much.

Our gratitude should not be expressed *only* one day a year, but stand as an abiding commitment—every day of the year. In that way, Veterans, their families, and our survivors will never have to question the readiness of this large and powerful country to meet their need to live productive lives with respect and dignity.

There will never be enough we can do for those who have given so much personal treasure for the rest of us. We must do this right and well for those future generations of Americans, who deserve to have their Constitution protected and their freedoms preserved.

It has been my honor and privilege to speak with you today. I am inspired to see such a great group of people who are living lives worthy of the sacrifice of others. Thank you for

taking the time today to learn how best to care for our Veterans and guide them to the resources they need to live long, healthy and happy lives.

Thank you too for honoring the service and sacrifice of the men and women, who serve today at duty stations around the globe, and who have served in years past with the same unwavering commitment to protect all that we hold dear. We must continue to provide outstanding care to Veterans—today and every day—to help the Nation demonstrate its debt of gratitude to those who have so willingly fulfilled citizenship's highest calling.