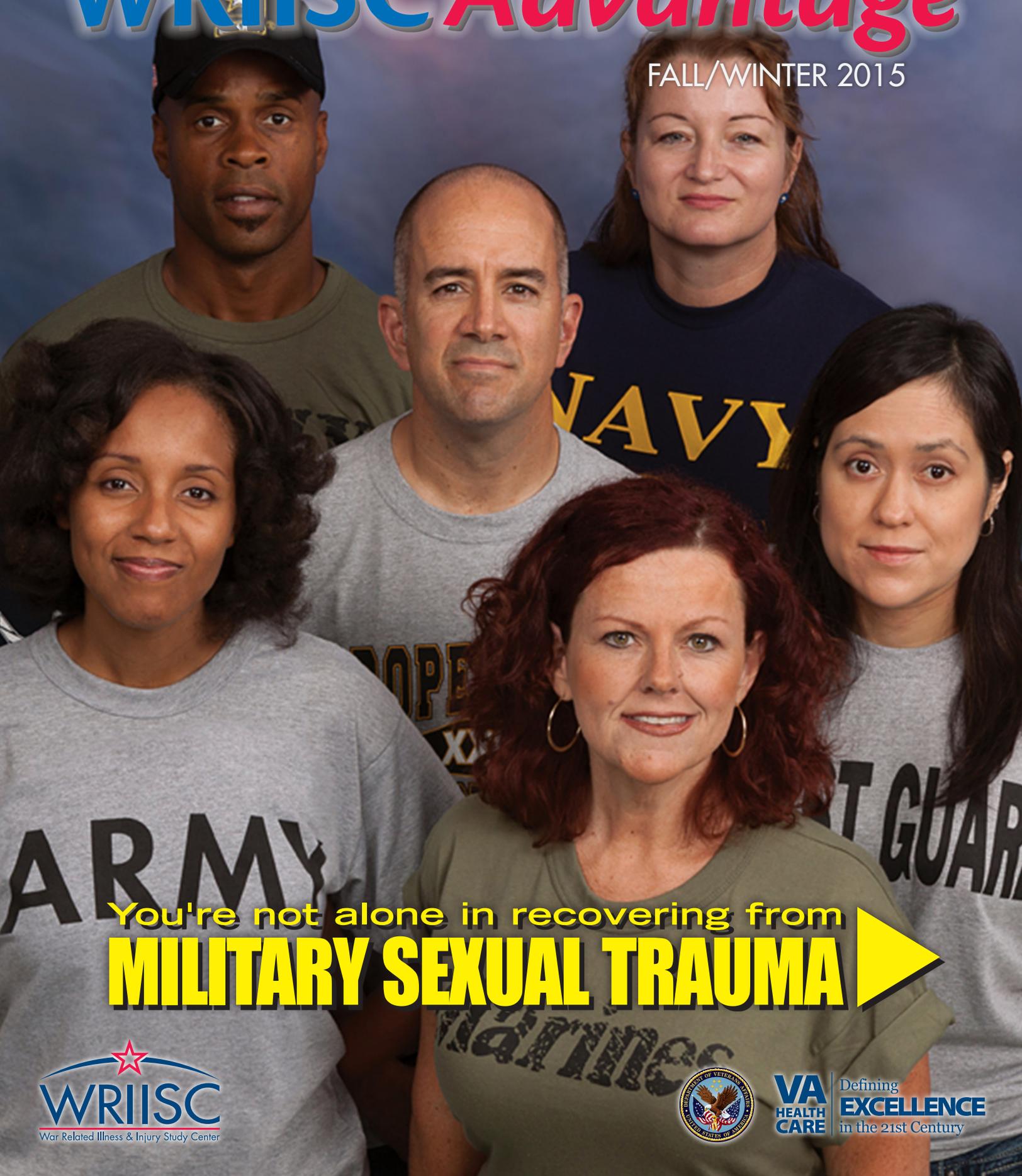


A National Newsletter for Veterans and their Health Care Providers

WRIISC *Advantage*

FALL/WINTER 2015



You're not alone in recovering from

MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA



VA HEALTH CARE | Defining **EXCELLENCE** in the 21st Century

This edition of *WRIISC Advantage* touches on the very important issue of the experience of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) during service. It also discusses current happenings at the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) and ways we work hard to advance the health and wellness of Veterans.

Military Sexual Trauma and Post-Deployment Health

MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA (MST) is a term used by Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to refer to sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that occurred during a Veteran's military service. MST includes any sexual activity in which a Servicemember was involved against his or her will, was unable to consent, or was physically forced into sexual activities. Other actions that fall into the category of MST might include unwanted sexual touching or grabbing; threatening, offensive remarks about a person's body or sexual activities; and threatening and unwelcome sexual advances. *MST is not a diagnosis or a mental health condition; rather, it is an event or*



About one in five women and one in 100 men have told their VA health care provider that they experienced sexual trauma in the military, according to VA.

experience that can have physical and mental health consequences. Men or women may be survivors of MST but experience emotional symptoms. These might include shame and self-blame; painful memories; feelings of numbness; difficulty with attention, concentration and memory; problems with alcohol or drugs; and difficulty in relationships. Physical health problems such as headaches, stomach problems, and muscle or joint pain are also common. The most common diagnoses associated with MST are Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), mood disorders (e.g., episodes of depression), and substance use disorders. Although a link exists between

ARE YOU A VETERAN WHO EXPERIENCED MST AND SEEKS HELP?

VETERANS SEEKING MORE INFORMATION can speak with their VA health care provider or MST Coordinator at their nearest VA Medical Center or local Vet Center. A list of VA and Vet Center facilities can be found at www.va.gov and www.vetcenter.va.gov. Veterans can also learn more about VA's MST-related services online at www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp and see video clips with the recovery stories of Veterans who have experienced MST at maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma.



MST and these mental health diagnoses, there are many Veterans without a history of MST who have similar problems.

The fact that Veterans are more likely to have experienced other types of traumatic events in addition to sexual trauma means that effective treatment requires providers to be aware of the Veteran's experience broadly. This will help providers to more effectively treat MST with appropriate evidence-based trauma therapies.

VA as a community is strongly committed to ensuring that Veterans have access to the help they need to recover from MST. Every VA health care facility has a designated MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues. This person can help Veterans find and access VA services and programs. Recognizing that many survivors of sexual trauma do not disclose their experiences unless asked directly, VA health care providers ask every Veteran whether he or she experienced MST. This

Recovery from trauma, even many years later, is possible with the appropriate help.

is an important way of making sure Veterans know about the services available to them. Services include things such as

free treatment of health conditions related to MST (even for Veterans who are not service-connected) or programs for Veterans who need more intense treatment and support.

As part of the VA community, the WRIISC offers specialty evaluations for Veterans with deployment-related injuries, including the possible physical, psychological, and social impact of MST if it has occurred. Each Veteran referred to the WRIISC is screened for MST as part of their comprehensive on-site evaluation. The WRIISC's comprehensive teams of health clinicians work with Veterans to identify and meet the needs of survivors of MST. Together we assist Veterans with the most appropriate referrals and encourage them to take part in the free, confidential counseling, and treatment services available through their local VA or Vet Center. ↪

CA WRIISC Provides Specialty Treatment Service for MST

THE CA WRIISC YOGA PROGRAM, in conjunction with the VA Palo Alto Recreation Therapy department, has been providing specialized yoga classes to female Veterans as part of their treatment in a residential trauma recovery program for the past year. The instructor is a certified Trauma Sensitive Yoga Teacher and creates a class in a safe environment, where Veterans can choose to participate. The class is designed to help participants stay focused on the present moment and to become more connected with the physical sensations of the body. The Veterans learn to recognize what feels appropriate and are able to decide if a particular posture is right for them physically and emotionally. Each class includes yoga breathing techniques and gentle postures (can be performed by people who are already quite fit but who lack the overall flexibility to do some of the more intense yoga poses), and develops bodily awareness through slow, deliberate movement. A significant portion of the women in the program have never taken a yoga class before. Most attendees report feeling more relaxed and less stressed when the class is completed. ↪



NJ WRIISC Hosts “Scientific Advances in Respiratory Health and Military Deployments Symposium”



The **WRIISC Airborne Hazards Center of Excellence** in NJ continues to expand its leadership on exposure issues in the VA community. On June 30th, the WRIISC hosted an in-person symposium titled, “Scientific Advances in Respiratory Health and Military Deployments Symposium.” Over 40 researchers and providers from VA’s Office of Public Health, the U.S. Army Public Health Command, Brooke Army Medical Center, and Rutgers University met to learn about new research findings and how to address Veterans’ health concerns. Specific topics covered included respiratory health and VA’s Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry, among others. Extremely positive feedback was received from attendees who noted that their learning expectations were met or exceeded, and that they felt other VA providers and their Veterans would benefit from what they had learned. Comments included, “It was wonderful to learn about ongoing research efforts, as well as efforts to increase sharing of research work in the Veteran community,” and “Outstanding program. Information from all presenters was extremely interesting and worthwhile.”

WRIISC Remains Dedicated to **GULF WAR RESEARCH**

OUR TEAM of WRIISC researchers and clinicians continues working together to improve clinical care for Gulf War Veterans (GWVs) through our research. Current WRIISC studies focus on all aspects of Gulf War Illness; from physiological and behavioral studies to neuroimaging studies and how best to deliver health care to GWVs. Findings from these studies provide insight into the health of GWVs, add to the foundation for future research studies, and bring effective treatments closer to reality. Sharing our research results with clinicians and Veterans and their family members is an essential part of offering higher quality care for Veterans. At the WRIISC, enhancing health status and life quality for Veterans is at the forefront of our mission. GWV-related research remains a priority! To learn more about our current research studies visit: www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov/research.



New WRIISC Referral Process

Veterans and VA providers should be aware of changes in the WRIISC referral process. Referrals to the WRIISC program may only be made by the Veteran's:

- ✓ Primary Care Provider (PCP),
- ✓ Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT),
- ✓ Post-Deployment Health Champion, or
- ✓ Environmental Health Provider.

Referrals are completed using the Inter-Facility Consult (IFC) process in VA’s Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS).

Each Veteran referred to the WRIISC receives an E-consult which consists of:

A thorough medical record review addressing a provider's questions and Veteran's top concerns. Our team supports the referring healthcare team by providing an integrated E-consult response report that summarizes the Veteran’s medical concerns, diagnostic tests and treatment to date, detailed recommendations for further assessment, and resources for additional information.

&

Suggestions on next management steps for the provider and Veteran to follow. Our findings, assessment, and recommendations are written in a response attached to the Inter-facility WRIISC consult in CPRS. The recommendations to a provider may include further clinical services offered by the WRIISC including our *comprehensive multidisciplinary evaluation* or an *exposure assessment*.

For more information about the referral process or questions about our services visit the WRIISC website: www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov/referral.

THE VETERANS CHOICE PROGRAM

PROVIDERS FACE A CHALLENGING TASK

in caring for our Nation’s Veterans due to the wide variety of unique physical, mental, emotional, and social health concerns they endure. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) participates in a number of special programs that benefit Veterans by maximizing their



health care quality and meeting their special needs. The Veterans Choice Program was established by Congress through the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act (VACAA) of 2014. This law requires VHA to offer an authorization to receive non-VA care to any Veteran who is enrolled in the VHA system as of August 1, 2014, or who is a newly discharged combat Veteran and unable to secure an appointment at a VA medical facility within 30 days (or a future published goal established by VA), or resides more than 40 miles from the nearest VA medical facility. This law thus expands the number of options a Veteran has for receiving care to ensure timely access to high-quality care. More specifically, the program provides care to Veterans when their local VA medical center cannot due to lack of available specialists, long wait times, and extraordinary distance from the Veteran’s home, which have all been barriers to VA care in the past. The WRIISC supports the Veterans Choice Program by sharing expertise and knowledge within VA and non-VA provider communities about Veterans and their unique health care issues. For WRIISC educational materials for providers focused on understanding, responding to, and managing post-deployment health and exposure concerns visit: www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov/education.

If you are a non-VA provider participating in the Veterans Choice Program and wish to refer your Veteran patient to the WRIISC, please contact your nearest WRIISC location (see sidebar, page 7) for more information.



NJ WRIISC

New Medical Director

OMOWUNMI ("WUNMI") OSINUBI, MD, MSC, MBA, FRCA, ABIHM, IFM-CP was appointed as Medical Director at the NJ WRIISC in July. She leads the NJ WRIISC clinical team in providing post-deployment health services to our Nation's Veterans with deployment-related health and exposure concerns and assists VA clinicians in delivering the highest quality care.



Dr. Osinubi is a board-certified Occupational and Environmental Medicine physician with additional certifications in Integrative Health and Functional Medicine. Before joining the WRIISC, she was on faculty at Rutgers University's School of Public Health and was Associate Director of the residency program in Occupational and Environmental Medicine. At the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute (EOHSI), she directed the Information Toxicology Project funded by the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services. There, she led the team that wrote the medical toxicology and health effects sections for approximately 1,400 hazardous substances fact sheets, which are part of the New Jersey Right to Know program for hazardous chemicals in the workplace.

“My experience at the WRIISC enhances my leadership role and allows our team to develop innovative services to help improve clinical care of Veterans with post-deployment health and exposure concerns.”

Dr. Osinubi began working with the WRIISC in 2008 as an Occupational Medicine Physician and established herself as a national expert in exposure concerns of deployed Veterans. Dr. Osinubi also co-developed and provided clinical leadership to the Airborne Hazards Center of Excellence within the WRIISC to comprehensively examine Veterans with cardiopulmonary symptoms and exposure concerns related to poor air quality and potentially toxic respiratory contaminants during their military deployments.

DC WRIISC

New Medical Director

SHARON DeMOCKER, MD joins the Washington, DC VA Medical Center as the new Medical Director of the DC WRIISC. She previously headed an Integrative Medical clinic near Asheville, NC for over a decade, which she founded following her training with Dr. Andrew Weil at the University of Arizona. This was the first postdoctoral Integrative Medicine training center in the country. She completed her residency in Family Medicine through the University of Virginia with a focus on healthy lifestyle choices to prevent disease, which included her first clinical training with Dr. Weil. During medical school at the Medical University of South Carolina, she was involved in research on the physical and psychological aftermath of trauma.



Dr. DeMocker has a strong interest in optimizing health through diet and lifestyle changes, as well as evidence-based, non-pharmaceutical treatments for treating chronic conditions, such as acupuncture, yoga, meditation, and bodywork, including physical therapy, myofascial release, and Therapeutic Touch.

Dr. DeMocker believes that Integrative Medicine gives us a lot more tools to treat chronic conditions, in addition to conventional medications. By focusing on a person's lifestyle and using complementary treatments, we can often get at the root of the problem causing the symptoms, instead of just band-aiding the symptoms.

Dr. DeMocker is leading the WRIISC clinical team in expanding access to post-deployment health evaluation services for our Veterans with deployment-related health and exposure concerns, and developing and expanding resources to assist VA providers in bringing the highest quality, patient-centered care to our Nation's Veterans.

“It's exciting that VA is at the forefront of research and clinical use of the latest, evidence-based Integrative therapies. This focus on the whole patient instead of just the disease is moving VA to a leading position in 21st century medicine.”

CA WRIISC

Highlighting Current Research Efforts

CURRENT RESEARCH EFFORTS AT THE CA WRIISC are focused on creating better ways to diagnose commonly reported health conditions in the Veteran population such as Chronic Multisymptom Illness (CMI) (including chronic pain), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). The following research was conducted by post-doctoral fellows under the supervision of Dr. Maheen Adamson, with coordinated efforts and contributions from all CA WRIISC staff.

- ▶ **DR. KEITH MAIN**, a former WRIISC fellow, measured the integrity of brain white matter fibers utilizing advanced neuroimaging techniques. Measurements were done to assess the capability of these techniques to detect mild and moderate TBI in WRIISC patients when compared to TBI diagnosis provided by a neurologist. This research (under peer review) proposes an approach to incorporate advanced neuroimaging as a complement to neurological examination, providing additional information for diagnostic use.
- ▶ **DR. NATHAN HANTKE**, a WRIISC post-doctoral fellow, analyzed the standard neuropsychological battery used at the CA WRIISC during screening for cognitive problems related to TBI and PTSD. It was found that this screening battery was more sensitive for a PTSD diagnosis than it was for a history of TBI. This work highlights the difficulty associated with diagnosing TBI which currently relies heavily on self-report.
- ▶ **DR. TONG SHENG**, a WRIISC post-doctoral fellow, characterized the extent to which multiple medical conditions are associated with functional health in a sample of Veteran patients with complex medical histories (under peer review). Among the medical factors investigated, PTSD symptom severity accounted for the biggest difference in all aspects of daily functioning, and particularly those related to emotional (or mentally based) processes. These results emphasize the need for effective treatment for PTSD and the negative impact PTSD can have on daily functioning.

Stay tuned for future research on Veterans' top health concerns conducted by the CA WRIISC! 📧

Produced by the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center

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VA has free services for Veterans who experienced Military Sexual Trauma.



The WRIISC strives to address **all** deployment health concerns.

Visit our websites for more information:



www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp and www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov