U.S. Women Veterans of the Vietnam-Era: Health Links Found Four Decades Later

Vietnam-era women veterans, now mostly in their 60s, face poorer health-related quality of life linked to certain experiences in the military: Sexual harassment and discrimination, warfare-related exposures and perceptions of danger, and subsequent mental health conditions all correlate with the women’s poorer daily functioning more than 40 years later.

That’s the key finding from the first study ever done on the long-term effects of military service on the functioning and disability levels of U.S. women veterans of the Vietnam era. The report, published online ahead of print, will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Psychosomatic Medicine*, journal of the American Psychosomatic Society.

“We hope these results will draw attention to the importance of continuing to examine and address the long-term health and healthcare needs of women who served in the military,” says study leader Brian Smith, PhD, Research Health Scientist in the Women’s Health Sciences Division of the National Center for PTSD at VA Boston Healthcare System, and Assistant Professor at Boston University School of Medicine.

The findings also have important ramifications for the future, he adds, because the number of U.S. women military members has soared since the Vietnam era. In recent years, the proportion of active duty service members who are male has been dropping while the proportion who are female has increased; women are now 16% of the active U.S. military force, and a growing number are veterans. Also, in addition to sexual harassment, which remains a major problem, women officially began serving in combat roles over six years ago, exposing them to more of the very warfare-related conditions linked to later-life health problems.

Smith collaborated with several coauthors on the research, among them colleagues Kathryn Magruder, PhD, and Avron Spiro, PhD. The findings were based on data from the large Health of Vietnam Era Women’s Study developed by the Department of Veteran Affairs.

Their study participants included more than 4,000 women veterans of the Vietnam era; about 2,000 served in Vietnam, the rest either nearby or in the U.S. Their average age upon enlistment was 22, and they were 67 years old on average at the study time.
The researchers asked about an array of military job-related conditions and also evaluated current physical and mental health issues that could affect daily functioning. Energy, mobility, pain, cognition, social participation and current mental disorders were among factors considered in the study.

In addition to the earlier military conditions linked to poorer late-life functioning, PTSD was linked to all of the study’s indicators of functioning and disability, and major depression was the strongest risk factor for worse disability and mental health functioning, followed by PTSD. This suggests that it’s important to consider the risk and impact of depression as well as PTSD for older women veterans, notes Smith.

These findings also have implications for primary care doctors outside the VA, since most women veterans are treated by community physicians. “Asking female patients about military service experience is probably not on the radar of most GPs outside the VA,” he adds, “so hopefully this will bring some awareness.”

The robust link between sexual harassment while in the service and later health problems is perhaps not surprising. Studies of post-9/11 veterans have documented the effects of sexual harassment and assault on both female and male service members’ mental and physical health, says Smith. “These experiences are disproportionately faced by women, which makes it especially important to consider their effects on healthy aging and quality of life over the long term.”

As the current surge of young women veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan now re-enter civilian life, “what our results suggest is that the effects of these stress exposures could continue to undermine their health for decades later.” Screening for associated health problems across the lifespan is vital, he says.

Study Link:  
http://doi.org/10.1097/PSY.0000000000000762

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