

Your guide to

GOOD HEALTH

THE IMPORTANCE OF A REGULAR VISIT TO YOUR GP

When it comes to serious illness, one piece of advice generally holds true across the board: early detection could save your life. While the first port of call for many of us might be “Doctor Google”, it is a visit to your local GP that could make all the difference to your future health.

AS their title suggests, a GP is a generalist. This means they are trained to assist you with a range of physical and mental symptoms and, where required, refer you to specialists. Over the course of regular visits, a GP is able to establish a better picture of your overall health and compile a detailed record of your family history of illness and other risk factors for disease.

Here at the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation (GMRF), we understand the importance of the GP, and we want to equip them with the knowledge they need to provide the best possible holistic care to their patients.

We also understand that knowledge comes through innovative medical research.

In 2013, GMRF and RSL (Queensland Branch) commenced an ambitious research project to help veterans and their families. The PTSD Initiative was a world-first study, investigating the physical and psychological toll of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Vietnam veterans.

PTSD is a debilitating condition that develops following exposure to a traumatic event. It has a 5 per cent prevalence rate in the Australian population and up to 20 per cent prevalence among veterans. Sufferers of PTSD can experience severely affected quality of life, including relationships, social and vocational functioning, and physical health.

The systems of your body do not operate in isolation. If you're having issues with one system, there is a significant chance of problems developing in other parts of your body. The findings of our PTSD Initiative, as you'll see in the box to the right, reveal the whole-body impact of PTSD.

With the study now published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, we have translated this research into clinical practice, with an education program to help general practitioners and other healthcare professionals better identify the signs and symptoms of PTSD.

To date, 466 health professionals have enrolled in our online education program, with 359 completions. Of those, 94 per cent stated they would

Long considered a solely psychological condition, this research found that PTSD contributed to long-term poor physical health outcomes for sufferers, including:

- Almost four times more likely to have suffered a heart attack in the past
- Two to three times increased risk of suffering from gastrointestinal problems, including irritable bowel syndrome and its associated symptoms, in addition to reflux and stomach ulcers
- Two times more likely to have abnormal liver texture, suggestive of liver disease
- Four times higher risk of fatty liver
- Most likely to exhibit decreased lung function
- Three times more likely to suffer from obstructive sleep apnoea

20%
(up to)
prevalence rate
of PTSD among
veterans

94%
Of health professionals who
completed the GMRF online
education program stated
they would be confident
managing a patient with
PTSD

5%
prevalence rate
of PTSD in the
Australian
population



be confident managing a patient with PTSD, having completed the education. When a patient with PTSD comes in for a check-up, a doctor who has completed the education program will be able to flag the physical health ailments (outlined on the previous page) as being of higher risk. Conversely, if a patient presents with a cluster of the relevant physical conditions, the doctor has the training – backed up by research – to organise appropriate screening for ailments and provide, where possible, immediate treatment.

From the interviews conducted in our PTSD Initiative, we know many Vietnam veterans went years – decades, even – before receiving

the diagnosis of PTSD. In that time, they suffered not only from the PTSD itself, but from other physical, social and mental issues. Unfortunately, we cannot rewind the clock to provide the immediate support these veterans deserved, but we can now provide better treatment pathways to current and former service personnel, as well as all who suffer from PTSD.

We have now delivered the education to 230 GPs face-to-face as part of our national PTSD roadshow, and have further presentations planned for GP conferences in Brisbane (early September) and Melbourne (mid-November). This is in addition to the GPs who have completed the education online.

“THE PROBLEM MANY VETERANS MAY FACE IS THAT THE CIVILIAN HEALTHCARE SYSTEM RELIES ON THEM ACTIVELY SEEKING OUT TREATMENT.”

RESEARCH IN PRACTICE



GP Ambassador of the GMRF education program, Dr Phil Parker, is committed to enhancing veteran health.

GP Ambassador of the GMRF education program, Dr Phil Parker, is committed to enhancing veteran health. With over 27 years' experience as a military doctor, Dr Parker is now working as a community GP in Brisbane, and understands the important role a GP plays in early intervention for PTSD and other serious illnesses.

“As a veteran, you should feel entitled to attain medical care from your GP for possible PTSD symptoms. There are many ex-serving members, who have left Defence, who have been exposed to a whole new world of healthcare that they don't really understand, or don't know how to access. A GP is there to guide them through the process,” Dr Parker said.

“The problem many veterans may face is that the civilian healthcare system relies on them actively seeking out treatment, as opposed to a military system where they had an obligation to undertake regular check-ups and treatment for any conditions they have suffered,” Dr Parker said.

According to Dr Parker, families play an important role in encouraging veterans to regularly visit their GP, and in the development and ongoing management of treatment plans for PTSD or other serious health issues.

Take Richard McLaren, a Vietnam veteran and participant in our PTSD Initiative study, for example. Diagnosed with PTSD in 1995, Richard has suffered from severe depression, attempted

“WE HAVE TRANSLATED THIS RESEARCH INTO CLINICAL PRACTICE, WITH AN EDUCATION PROGRAM TO HELP GENERAL PRACTITIONERS AND OTHER HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS BETTER IDENTIFY THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PTSD.”

Richard McLaren (pictured with his wife Karen), a Vietnam veteran and participant in the GMRF PTSD Initiative study, said his GP has been a key part of his support network.



suicide, anxiety attacks, social dysfunction and phobias.

“PTSD is a very selfish condition; you cannot think of anything else but yourself, whether you want to or not. It’s been important in my situation to have a very supportive and understanding partner beside me,” Richard said.

Richard’s GP has been a key part of his support network. It is a relationship that Richard says is based on a trust that has been built up over a length of time.

“Going to your GP is like going to a psychologist for the first time, where you need to give them the whole picture so they will get a better understanding of your situation. Veterans need to show a willingness to trust in their doctor.

“It is vital that you are honest from the beginning and your feelings and symptoms are recorded. You may also need to request a longer consultation with your GP to develop a mental healthcare plan,” Richard said.

Once a relatively unknown condition, many Australians now understand that PTSD is a condition suffered by individuals employed in roles where their safety is put at risk. Acceptance of PTSD by the general population as a “real” condition and a significant social cost to the country is growing. This, and increased media attention, instils confidence among sufferers that medical treatment is available, accessible and encouraged.

So, please do not underestimate the role your GP can play in your overall health. A regular check-up with your GP will often be your first line of defence in early diagnosis and treatment of serious illness. They may not have all the answers, but they are well-placed to make sure you get the help you need.

You can help us spread the word by mentioning the education program to your GP and other healthcare providers, by referring them to www.thinkgp.com.au/gmrf. They might be interested to know that they will earn Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points for completing the course. ←