



THE GP AND ME

How to build a relationship that could save your life.



“IF it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” may hold true for some aspects of your life, but it can be a dangerous approach to take for your health. Many of us reserve the rare visit to the local GP for when the alarm bells are well and truly ringing. But why wait to involve a GP, one of the greatest assets in maintaining good health, until the damage is already done?

When you consider the most important relationships in your life, chances are your GP isn’t ranking high on that list. But as life goes on, compounded by the impact of years of military service, the relationship you have with your GP could be critical to your health and wellbeing.

Transitioning from service can be an overwhelming process, and this is particularly true for navigating the healthcare system. This can be compounded by the first port of call – a visit to your general practitioner – being a vastly different, and often uncomfortable, experience from what you’ve grown accustomed to during service.

For Vietnam veteran Richard McLaren, his GP just didn’t understand what he’d been through. After serving in the Vietnam War, Richard returned home changed forever. Diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1995, Richard has suffered from severe depression, attempted suicide, and endured anxiety attacks, social dysfunction and phobias. From the outset, he struggled to trust or build rapport with his doctor.

“It can be terribly frustrating when you are dealing with people who were born after the Vietnam War and don’t know anything about the situation you were involved in,” Richard says.

PTSD can affect quality of life and have a negative impact on relationships, friendships, social and vocational function, as well as physical health. Many veterans suffer the symptoms of PTSD and are not aware that help is available.

These symptoms include irritability, anger, depressed mood, anxiety, social

isolation and poor sleep. Patients are also at increased risk of developing other physical conditions, including heart disease, gastric complaints and sleep disorders.

For veterans like Richard who suffer from PTSD, it can be difficult to trust the advice of someone with no first-hand experience of the ordeals experienced, or the resulting impact on mind and body.

With over 27 years with the Australian Defence Force, GMRF Ambassador of the GP education program, Dr Phil Parker, is one healthcare professional who does understand this toll.

“It can be difficult to recall and discuss some events from the past,” Dr Parker says. “The trauma may still be extremely raw, even years on from service. In a safe environment and with the right carer, it is possible to have discussions that can lead to significant benefits in quality of life.”

Dr Parker wants to assure veterans that there are general practitioners out there who are available and committed to the care of veterans.

“Engagement with the right health providers can make or break the treatment journey. It is important for the veteran to connect with a GP who is willing to invest in their long-term care.”

FINDING THE RIGHT GP FOR YOU

A solid rapport with your GP is critical to good treatment. While your current GP may be qualified to provide medical treatment, if you don’t feel comfortable providing them with personal information, it may be time to look for an alternative.

You don’t need a GP who has years of military experience, but you do need one who can appreciate how military service can have a tremendous impact on your mind, your body, and the way you interact with civilian medical professionals.

Ask yourself:

- Do I trust that my GP has my best interests in mind?
- Does my GP foster a safe and open environment?
- Does my GP know about the entitlements I am able to claim as a veteran?
- Does my GP understand the impact military service can have on mind and body?
- Does my GP refer me to specialists for both my physical and psychological health?
- Does my GP utilise the information from my specialists to support my overall care?

It is important to remember that however much it may not feel like it, help is available. When and how you receive support is now up to you.



Richard McLaren, alongside his wife Karen, shares his journey with PTSD at the launch of the PTSD Initiative findings in 2017.

HOW TO START THE PROCESS

STEP 1 Join a conversation. Ask your mates what is available locally in terms of medical facilities and healthcare professionals. A wide range of resources and helpful links to support organisations are available on the GMRF website (www.gallipoliresearch.com.au).

STEP 2 Go to the GP with your partner or someone from your support network. Having a support network that understands what you are going through can make a HUGE difference to your recovery. Take someone you can trust and rely on.

STEP 3 Request a longer consultation. A standard appointment is around 10 minutes long, which is unlikely to be enough time for the GP to gain a full picture of both your medical and military history, both of which are important to developing treatment plans.

STEP 4 Start small. If you don't want to talk to your doctor about the big things, perhaps start with things that are troubling you now:

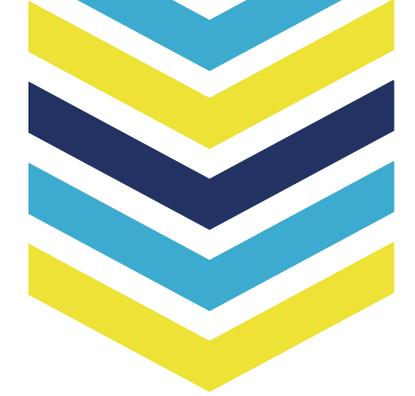
1. Your medication;
2. Trouble controlling your anger;
3. If you're not having good sleep;
4. If you're experiencing aches and pains.

At your following appointments you can talk about other, bigger things that are bothering you. Always try and be honest with the GP right from the start; this helps build trust and rapport.

STEP 5 Know your entitlements. As a veteran, you are entitled to claim for a range of health services. For example, veterans are entitled to government-funded mental healthcare. Veterans should lodge form D9213 to the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), which is available on their website (www.dva.gov.au). The Veteran Services team at RSL Queensland can also help you submit this claim (phone 134 RSL). Once processed, all mental healthcare will be supported by DVA. This entitlement extends to all mental health conditions, regardless of whether it is related to service or not.

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With the help of the right health team, it is possible for veterans with PTSD to live high-functioning lives. With the right support, effective treatment can be provided to help all veterans.

Understanding of the condition of PTSD among medical professionals has come a long way in recent years, and the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation is committed to ensuring it goes even further by equipping them with the knowledge they need to provide the best possible holistic care to their patients.

New knowledge comes through innovative medical research, and in 2013 GMRF and RSL Queensland commenced a research project to help veterans and their families. The PTSD Initiative was a world-first study, investigating the physical and psychological toll of PTSD in Vietnam veterans.

With the study now published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, this research has been translated into clinical practice, with an education program to help GPs and other healthcare professionals better identify the signs and symptoms of PTSD. To date, almost 650 health professionals have completed the GMRF online education module. Of those, over 95 per cent stated they would be confident managing a patient with PTSD, having completed the education.

You can help spread the word by mentioning the education program to your GP and other healthcare providers and 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.

To find out more about the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation, visit www.gallipoliresearch.com.au. ←



- Since March 2017, almost 650 healthcare professionals have enrolled to learn more about PTSD and earn CPD points at www.thinkgp.com.au/gmrf.
- Dr Phil Parker, GP and veteran, has presented the same material to audiences at GP conferences around the country.
- Of the healthcare professionals who completed the program, over 95 per cent said they would be confident managing a patient with PTSD.
- An extensive range of resources is available from the GMRF website – www.gallipoliresearch.com.au.
- Testimonial from a GP who has completed the program: “An excellent presentation on a very pertinent subject – we have all managed Vietnam vets and supported families over the years, but this certainly brings all the information together.”