



GulfNEWS

A bimonthly newsletter serving the interests of Gulf War veterans

GAO Reports on OSAGWI Efforts

By Barbara Goodno
Public Affairs

The Defense Department “has made progress in carrying out its mandate to comprehensively address Gulf War illnesses-related issues,” according to a General Accounting Office report released this week. The report credits the Department’s efforts to respond to complaints and inquiries from veterans while pointing out that the DoD’s evaluation of cases could be improved.

For the past 18 months, the GAO has reviewed DoD’s Office of the Special Assistant for Gulf War Illnesses’ procedures to determine whether it has diligently addressed issues related to Gulf War illnesses. The GAO’s specific objectives were to describe DoD’s progress in establishing an organization to address Gulf War illnesses issues and to evaluate the thoroughness of OSAGWI’s investigation into and reporting of incidents of potential chemical or biological warfare agent exposures during the Gulf War.

“The GAO investigators painstakingly reviewed our methodology, investigative procedures and techniques,” said Bernard Rostker, the special assistant for Gulf War illnesses. “We are pleased that they found them appropriate; that they found no appreciable

errors in four of the six cases investigated and agreed with our assessments in five of the six narratives reviewed outright.”

In the sixth case, the GAO asked DoD’s investigators to reconsider the conclusion in light of new information. They said that an “indeterminate” assessment might be more appropriate. Rostker said incorporating new information and revising reports is at the heart of his office’s process.

The GAO also suggested improved internal review procedures and the Defense Department concurred. “We agree to revise our reports to include new or unreported data. The findings will be reassessed based upon any new evidence,” Rostker said. “This is consistent with our philosophy of publishing interim – not final – reports.”

Rostker said the GAO’s efforts will have a long-term, positive effect on DoD’s investigation of the illnesses of Gulf War veterans. “Throughout the GAO’s investigation,” he said, “the staff provided periodic briefings, often offering pragmatic, candid suggestions. Through this communication process, we were able to make improvements and policy changes. Consequently, we have already begun to address



An Army M1A1 tank stands guard at a checkpoint outside a base camp in the Kuwaiti desert. The camp has been set up in Kuwait as part of a buildup of forces in response to Iraq's refusal of U.N. sponsored weapons inspections. U.S. Navy photo by PH2 Jeff Viano.

most of the recommendations made in the report. This has been a very worthwhile effort.”

The GAO is a nonpartisan organization that conducts research and investigation for Congress. This report was requested by Rep. Lane Evans of Illinois, ranking Democrat on the House Veterans Affairs Committee.

U.S. Team Explores Saudi Gulf War Study

By Diana Berardocco
Public Affairs

A U.S. interagency team is working with the Saudi Arabian National Guard to conduct a study of health outcomes among Guard members and their families to better understand possible health consequences of the Gulf War.

Navy Capt. Michael Kilpatrick, director of medical outreach and issues, office of the special assistant for Gulf War illnesses, traveled with a team of U.S. epidemiologist researchers to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in August 1998 and met Dr. Fahad Al Abdul Jabbar, the chief executive officer, health affairs, Saudi Arabian National Guard.

“The purpose of the trip was to discuss the feasibility of using the Saudi National Guard health database to examine whether changes had occurred in the health status of the Guard or their families since the Gulf War,” said Kilpatrick.

Researchers from the Uniformed Services University for Health Sciences, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Naval Health Research Center are involved in the collaborative effort initiated by the office of the special assistant.

The invitation to return to Saudi Arabia was extended to Bernard Rostker, special assistant for Gulf War illnesses, and his team when they met with Saudi Arabian National Guard officials during a Gulf War coalition fact-finding trip in November 1997. At that time, Saudi Arabian officials indicated they had not observed any change in the medical condition of their Gulf War veterans.

“We wanted to compare the hospitalization rate for members of the Saudi National Guard who were on duty during the Gulf War and then take a look at trends for them before the Gulf War and after,” said Kilpatrick. “We want to see if there were any changes in disease processes or frequency of diseases that require hospitalization.”

In order to proceed with this analysis, the *(continued on page 4)*

Tax Penalty Rescinded

By Ivory Graham
Public Affairs

An amendment to existing legislation will make thousands of disabled veterans eligible for a refund from Veterans Affairs. Others may receive disability compensation payment much earlier than previously anticipated.

The revision affects those veterans who accepted the lump sum Special Separation Benefit during the force drawdown and later qualified for VA disability compensation. Previous legislation mandated that recoupment of after tax withholding would apply only to SSB payments received on or after October 1, 1996. Those received prior to October 1 had to be recouped based on the gross amount paid. The amendment provides for recoupment of the amount paid after withholding tax and includes SSB payments made between December 5, 1991 to October 1, 1996.

Federal law prohibits veterans from receiving concurrent payment of both VA disability pay and service retirement or separation pay. When veterans who receive service or separation pay are found to be eligible for additional disability compensation, the VA withholds payment long enough to recoup the amount of the full separation pay. For example, if a separating member qualifies for an SSB of \$40,000 and \$10,000 was withheld for federal taxes, the VA would withhold compensation until it recouped all \$40,000.

In 1996, Congress agreed that it was unfair to tax veterans for money never received and changed the law to limit the amount that can be recouped to the net amount paid after federal tax withholding. Using the example above, the member who received \$30,000 after taxes, can now receive VA benefits after \$30,000 is exceeded. According to Ken McKinnon, a VA spokesperson, despite the amendment's passing in June, many veterans are not aware of the change.

"The VA's 58 regional offices were notified in August and they have been working in coordination with the Department of Defense to identify those veterans who have been affected," he said.

The VA urges that veterans be insistent when making a request for repayment. Requests for adjustments must be accompanied by documentation showing the amount of federal income taxes withheld.

Contact your local VA office or call 1-800-827-1000 for more information about refund eligibility.

This month we will release several new papers covering important concerns of Gulf War veterans. We are publishing our case narrative detailing our investigation into possible chemical exposures at a site in Kuwait called the 'cement factory' as well as two papers I commissioned from the RAND Corporation.

This new case narrative, "Cement Factory," is the first to take advantage of the thorough and painstaking review of our methodology, procedures and techniques by the GAO. We appreciate the GAO's effort to provide an objective report and have already begun implementing many of their recommendations.

The report provided important feedback on the effort we've made over the past 18 months while identifying some areas where we can improve our process as we continue our investigations. Most importantly, the GAO report showed that our commitment to veterans is on track.

In our efforts to investigate possible exposures at the "Cement Factory," we talked to key witnesses and searched for and located important records. The narrative will be published on *GulfLINK* when it is available and featured in the next issue of *GulfNEWS*. As always, this will be an interim report to be updated if new information becomes available.

The RAND literature review on natural and depleted uranium encompasses works

From the desk of
Bernard D. Rostker
Special Assistant for
Gulf War Illnesses



from journals, books, government publications and conference proceedings on depleted uranium risks while the RAND review of the military use of investigational new drugs examines the policy and legislation in using these drugs during the Gulf War.

In these reviews, RAND analyzes policy, litigation and scientific literature in the fields of health physics, heavy metal toxicology and health policy outside the Department of

Defense. These will also be available soon for your review on *GulfLINK* and stories will appear in *GulfNEWS*.

I commissioned the RAND Corporation, a non-profit research organization to conduct this independent research and analysis in support of DoD's efforts—these are the second and third reports to be published.

Of course, there are many more narratives and papers under development which I hope to share with you in the very near future.

As we continue to conduct our investigations, analysis, and research into what happened in the Gulf War, we have to ensure we continue to take great care to talk to key witnesses and uncover key documents. This is a time consuming process and we owe it to our veterans to get to the facts, no matter how challenging. It is through this continuing commitment that we will achieve the President's directive to "leave no stone unturned."

Treatment Trials Participating Sites

Exercise & Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (VA CSP #470) "EBT"

VA Medical Centers

Boston, Mass.	(617) 248-1399
Philadelphia, Pa.	(215) 823-5952
Portland, Ore.	(503) 494-1104
San Antonio, Texas	(210) 617-5300 x4061
San Juan, PR	(787) 758-7575 x5656
Seattle, Wash.	(206) 764-2205
West Haven, Conn.	(203) 932-5711 x3357
Burlington, Vt.	(802) 864-4492

Antibiotic Therapy (VA CSP #475) "ABT"

VA Medical Centers

Albany, N.Y.	(518) 462-3311 x3080
Albuquerque, N.M.	(505) 265-1711 x2396
Augusta, Ga.	(706) 733-0188 x2305
Boston, Mass.	(617) 232-9500 x4340
Bronx, N.Y.	(800) 877-6976
Charleston, S.C.	(803) 577-5011 x7376
Durham, N.C.	(919) 286-6950
Manchester, N.H.	(800) 892-8384 x6080
Milwaukee, Wis.	(414) 384-2000 x2760

Montgomery, Ala.	(334) 272-4670 x4466
Nashville, Tenn.	(615) 327-4751 x7852
New Orleans, La.	(504) 568-0811 x5491
Oklahoma City, Okla.	(405) 270-0501 x3106
Omaha, Neb.	(402) 449-0650
Philadelphia, Pa.	(215) 823-5979
Providence, R.I.	(401) 457-3045
Salt Lake City, Utah	(801) 582-1565 x1184
San Juan, PR	(787) 758-7575 x3311
Tampa, Fla.	(813) 974-0798

Both EBT & ABT participating

DoD Medical Centers

NHRC San Diego, Calif.	(619) 524-0069
Walter Reed AMC, D.C.	(202) 782-6563

VA Medical Centers

Albuquerque, N.M.	(505) 265-1711 x2587
Birmingham, Ala.	(888) 820-1102
Dayton, Ohio	(937) 268-6511 x1212
East Orange, N.J.	(800) 248-8005
Fargo, N.D.	(701) 239-3700 x3502
Houston, Texas	(713) 794-7543
Richmond, Va.	(888) 289-1632
San Francisco, Calif.	(415) 221-4810 x2287
White River Jct., Vt.	(802) 295-9363 x5562

New Treatment Trials Help Gulf Veterans

By Austin Camacho
Public Affairs

The federal government plans to begin medical treatment trials in April to evaluate two possible therapeutic approaches to improve the health and quality of life of Gulf War veterans.

The two newest trials, Antibiotic Treatment Trial and Exercise-Behavioral Therapy address two critical areas of concern for Gulf War illnesses studies and the Research Working Group, which provides guidance and coordination for research sponsored by the Department of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Health and Human Services.

"We feel the time is right to explore effective treatment options for these types of conditions," says Timothy Gerrity, Ph.D., special assistant to the VA's chief research and development officer and the caretaker of the Research Working Group's day-to-day activities. "That led to VA and DoD launching large scale, multi-site treatment trials of Gulf War veterans and their illnesses. The focus of one treatment trial is a combination of aerobic exercise and cognitive behavioral therapy."

That trial, called EBT for Exercise-Behavioral Therapy, will be conducted at 19 sites and will study more than 1,300 Gulf War veterans. Gerrity stresses that the illnesses Gulf War veterans have are real, physical ailments, and that despite its name, cognitive behavioral therapy is not psychotherapy.

"This technique has been applied in many illnesses that are firmly bound in the body, from chronic back pain to the pain associated with cancer," he says.

However, Gerrity says this treatment trial won't get researchers any closer to knowing the cause of sick veterans' symptoms. Nor will this therapy be a cure for Gulf War illnesses, even if it is effective in relieving symptoms.

"It is a means by which we can reduce the suffering and the pain while we continue to go on to better understand it through research. When it comes to making someone feel better, and making someone well, the issue of what caused it is not necessarily important," Gerrity says.

The second trial, called the Antibiotic Treatment Trial, focuses on the theory that Gulf War veterans are infected by an organism called *Mycoplasma fermentans incognitus*. No

definitive link has been established between this organism and Gulf War illnesses, but an unknown number of sick veterans are already taking the antibiotic doxycycline in hopes of curing this possible infection. This trial will hopefully determine whether 12 months of antibiotic treatment using doxycycline will improve the health of veterans who have tested positive for *Mycoplasma fermentans incognitus*. This trial will involve 450 patients at 30 different facilities.

These treatment trials are just the latest of more than 120 research projects the federal government currently has ongoing in search of the nature, causes and possible treatments of

Gulf War illnesses. Those projects cover a broad spectrum of approaches, from basic laboratory research to large-scale studies focused on veterans' symptoms, and are being carried out by a variety of scientific and medical groups across the country. Uniting that extensive diversity of scientific research is the job of the Persian Gulf Veterans Coordinating Board's Research Working Group. The group provides guidance and coordination for more than \$120 million of vital research related to the Desert Shield and Storm deployments.

The Research Working Group monitors the state and direction of research, identifies gaps in the medical knowledge and understanding of Gulf War illnesses and identifies theories worth testing. Gerrity says when the next report is released this spring it will emphasize the need for sound research on improved diagnosis and treatment of the symptoms Gulf War veterans have shown.

Gerrity says the need for a large number of projects remains because the question being asked – "Why are these veterans sick?" – is a difficult one.

"Any problem related to the appearance of unidentified illnesses is going to require a multiplicity of approaches," Gerrity says. "We have a number of risk factors that we need to look at in terms of trying to gain some insight into whether or not these exposures could really have caused the illness."

Aside from possible exposure to oil fire smoke, pesticides, depleted uranium, nerve agents and a number of other potentially toxic substances, Gerrity says stress itself is a harmful exposure.

"Anything that you are exposed to – heat,

cold, chemicals, and events that impact upon you emotionally – can affect the body," Gerrity says. "We need to think of these much more as a whole than as separate individual entities."

Gerrity says the research done so far has shown the undiagnosed illnesses plaguing Gulf War veterans to be similar to some other symptom-based illnesses, such as chronic fatigue syndrome. "But we're not saying that what Gulf War veterans have is chronic fatigue syndrome," Gerrity says, "because we're seeing a pattern that does not fit together with CFS." For example, research in civilian populations shows that CFS occurs twice as often in women as in men.

The research direction recommended by the Research Working Group looks to the future as well as the past. "With respect to Gulf War veterans there is a new focus on diagnosis and treatment. With respect to future veterans it's looking at prevention, at how we can intervene before we have a problem."

Research Working Group

The Research Working Group monitors the state and direction of research, identifies gaps in the medical knowledge and understanding of Gulf War illnesses and identifies theories worth testing. Its *Annual Report to Congress* includes several recommendations for the direction of future research. Gerrity says when the next report is released this spring it will emphasize the need for sound research on improved diagnosis and treatment of the symptoms Gulf War veterans have shown.

Recommending research direction is only part of the Research Working Group's significance. The importance of the group's collecting and disseminating scientifically peer-reviewed research information was demonstrated in June by the success of its *Conference on Federally Sponsored Research on Gulf War Veterans Illnesses Research* in Washington. More than 280 scientists, physicians and others from around the world examined each other's efforts to understand the nature of Gulf War illnesses.

"I can honestly say today that we have made a lot of progress, and that we're moving ahead quickly. You're going to see in the next 12 months a large number of publications come out," says Gerrity.

He expects this year's meeting will be open to the public.



Resources for Veterans

Your ticket to the information highway — visit our GulfLINK web site at:
<http://www.gulfink.osd.mil>

Gulf War veterans seeking information on VA benefits of all types should call the Persian Gulf Helpline at:
1-800-749-8387

Anyone with information on Gulf War incidents should call the DoD Incident Reporting Line at:
1-800-472-6719

Are you a Gulf War veteran (or know of one) with health problems? Call the DoD Gulf War Veterans Hotline at:
1-800-796-9699

(US Team – from page 1)

team was given access to the computerized medical hospitalization database located in the King Fahd Hospital in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, he said. The database chronicles every admission to the hospital since 1983, with hospital admission codes indicating the patient's diagnoses and medical procedures done during the admission.

Rostker's team will compare the records of approximately 50,000 Saudi National Guard Gulf War veterans located in three areas during the conflict. Records of personnel who were either engaged in battle with Iraq in northern Saudi Arabia; stationed at Al Jubayl, an industrial city south of the

Saudi Arabian-Kuwaiti border or located at Riyadh, where a Scud missile attack occurred, will be included in the study.

Researchers intend to compare these three geographically distinct groups to determine if there are any differences. They will have access to the age, gender and other population demographics of the individuals who were admitted to the hospital, but the study will not involve contacting any individual patients. Kilpatrick says that, if the data is available, the team will also look at changes in family members' rates of admission or health trends.

It is hoped that the benefits of this cooperative effort accrue to both Saudi Arabia and the United States.

"Hopefully our efforts will let us know if the people who lived there [in Saudi Arabia] before, during and after the Gulf War have had any change that is discernible in their health status," said Kilpatrick.

The U.S./Saudi Arabian medical partnership could assist Saudi medical personnel in analyzing the medical specialties needed to care for future Saudi patients.

King Fahd hospital has no research programs involving this hospitalization database; it simply archives the information. The U.S. team expects to demonstrate to hospital personnel how to extract and apply information that may be used



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for future medical planning requirements.

When the scientific protocol is approved by each participating institution in early 1999, the team will return to King Fahd hospital to extract data and begin the analysis. Kilpatrick projects that the completed study – co-published with the Saudi Arabian National Guard – will be available late in 1999.



A member of the 1st Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, explains the M-252 81mm mortar to Saudi Arabian national guardsmen during Operation Desert Shield. U.S. Army photo by Spec. Samuel D. Henry.

Agencies assisting Gulf War veterans:

<http://www.afa.org/>
Air Force Association
1501 Lee Highway
Arlington, VA 22209-1198

<http://www.legion.org/building.htm>
American Legion
1608 K St., NW
Washington, DC 20006

<http://www.amvets.org/>
AMVETS
4647 Forbes Blvd.
Lanham, MD 20706

<http://www.ausa.org/>
Association of the U.S. Army
2425 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22201

<http://www.dav.org/index.html>
Disabled American Veterans
807 Maine St., SW
Washington, DC

<http://www.eangus.org/>
Enlisted Association of the National Guard
1219 Prince St.
Alexandria, VA 22314

<http://www.fra.org/>
Fleet Reserve Association
125 N. West St.
Alexandria, VA 22314-2754

<http://www.mcleague.org/>
Marine Corps League
8626 Lee Highway, #201
Merrifield, VA 22031

<http://www.ngaus.org/>
National Guard Assn of the US
1 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20001

<http://www.navy-reserve.org/index.html>
Naval Reserve Association
1619 King St.
Alexandria, VA 22314-2793

<http://www.navyleague.org/>
Navy League
2300 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22201

<http://www.ncoausa.org/>
Non Commissioned Officers Association
225 N. Washington St.
Alexandria, VA 22314

<http://www.roa.org/>
Reserve Officers Association
1 Constitution Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20002

<http://www.troa.org/>
Retired Officers Association
201 N. Washington St.
Alexandria, VA 22314

<http://www.vfw.org/>
Veterans of Foreign Wars
200 Maryland Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20002

<http://www.vva.org/>
Vietnam Veterans of America
1224 M St., NW
Washington, DC 20005