

# 2005 Public Health Awards for Excellence and Innovation:

## Public Health Research Award for Excellence

### **Australian Gulf War Veterans' Health Study**

*Centre for Occupational & Environmental Health, Department of Epidemiology & Preventive Medicine, Monash University*

In an Australian first, a comprehensive epidemiological study has been undertaken of a veteran group, to understand the longer term health impacts of deployment to a conflict zone.

The Australian Gulf War Veterans' Health Study, completed in 2003, investigated whether Gulf War veterans were at increased risk of developing psychological disorders (such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and substance abuse disorders), and physical conditions related to the neurological system, respiratory system, chronic fatigue, or multi-symptom clusters consistent with 'Gulf War syndrome'.

Monash University's Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health collected data by face-to-face health assessment and postal questionnaire. More than 80 per cent of the Gulf War veterans (1,456) participated. The Gulf War veterans group was compared with a non-deployed defence force group, giving the study an advantage over international studies which generally used community-based comparisons.

The study found that veterans were at increased risk of all psychological disorders and that this was related to adverse stressors encountered during the Gulf War. In relation to physical conditions, symptom reporting was higher amongst the veteran group, however, no consistent health differences, or clusters of symptoms, were found between the deployed and non-deployed groups.

Previous overseas studies have relied on self-reporting of health outcomes and exposures, which can be unreliable. This study collected objective data from a range of sources, such as reviewing ships' logs to identify potentially stressful events, analysing blood specimens, looking at biochemical, haematological and serological markers of physical health, and undertaking respiratory function and exercise testing.

A consultative forum, comprising representatives of veteran stakeholder groups and their families, provided a regular forum of communication which was important in the success of the study. It allowed the veterans to have input into the study design and recruitment methods and therefore promoted ownership of the study.

The study provided valid and robust data about a wide range of psychological and physical health conditions in Australian Gulf War veterans, which has informed evidence-based public health decisions and policy development to reduce the impact of psychological disorders in veterans.

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