Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference

Families continue to be central to DVA’s business and have been identified as a major priority area for research. All families today are living in a world of rapid economic, environmental and technological change. This is no different for the families of veterans and Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel. In fact, these families often experience unique challenges due to the nature of the work the family member undertakes, including deployments away from home and the possibility of injury and exposure to danger and trauma.

DVA has partnered with the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) to undertake research work in the families domain. DVA, in partnership with Defence is presenting a symposium titled “Military service, veterans and their families” at the 13th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference 2014 – Families in a rapidly changing world. The conference is being held in Melbourne, over two days – 31 July 2014 and 1 August 2014. The AIFS conference provides a valuable opportunity for government policy-makers, service providers and practitioners, researchers and community organisations to meet and exchange ideas and knowledge. DVA hopes their contribution and involvement in the conference will raise the profile of veteran and defence families and provide links with external organisations to improve the lives of veterans, defence force personnel and their families.

Importantly, the work of the Veteran and Veteran Families Counselling Service (VVCS) will be showcased, as well as a range of technology applications designed to assist both veterans and their families face the challenges of life after service. Information on the conference is available at www.conference.aifs.gov.au

Senior International Forum and Ministerial Summit

In early April 2014, DVA Secretary Simon Lewis and First Assistant Secretary Health and Community Services Division, Judy Daniel represented the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs and the Department at the Senior International Forum and Ministerial Summit. These meetings were hosted by the United States Department of Veterans’ Affairs at the West Point Military Academy. Meetings of this sort are held every two years between officials from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. They provide an opportunity for heads of agencies responsible for Veterans’ Affairs to come together and discuss emerging issues, hear about latest research findings and hear how different countries deal with complex veteran and military health topics.

Ms Daniel presented on the Department’s strategic research model, outlining DVA’s new, proactive strategic research model, and the vital importance of engaging with the research community. DVA’s work with the Department of Defence has underlined this enhanced collaborative approach, through joint programmes such as the Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme and the Long-term Effects of Rehabilitation Arrangements for Serving and Ex-Serving Personnel. These joint programmes are allowing DVA to better understand the continuum of care, enabling the Department to enhance early intervention strategies and maximise long-term health and wellbeing.

Important research to be released by DVA in the coming year was highlighted, including health and wellbeing studies on Australian Peacekeepers, personnel deployed to Rwanda, families of Vietnam veterans and Mothers in the Middle East Area of Operations. Moving forward, DVA has a strong research focus on women’s veteran health issues, mental health, families, as well as veteran care service models for the future. These international relationships will assist Australia to strengthen its provision of quality care and services for veterans.

Transitions and Wellbeing Research Programme

On 11 June, the Government launched the $5 million Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme which is a significant new programme of research to improve the health and wellbeing of contemporary service personnel and veterans. Defence will contribute $1.2 million and DVA will contribute $3.8 million to this research programme.

This is the largest and most comprehensive programme of study undertaken in Australia to examine the impact of military service on the mental, physical and social health of serving and ex-serving personnel and their families who have deployed to contemporary conflicts. The programme will consist of three major studies. The first two studies will be co-led by the Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies at the University of Adelaide. The third study will be conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The first study, the Mental Health and Wellbeing Transition Study, will target both serving and ex-serving personnel to determine their mental, physical and social health status.

The second study, the Impact of Combat Study, will comprehensively follow-up the mental, physical and neuro-cognitive health of personnel who deployed to the Middle East Area of Operations between 2010 and 2012.

The third study, the Family and Wellbeing Study, will investigate the impact of military service on the health and wellbeing of the families of serving and ex-serving personnel.

Tackling the mental health challenges facing veterans and their families is a key pillar of the Government’s plan for veterans’ affairs. A strong, vibrant and resilient community is an integral component of our Australian landscape. History has shown that as a society, we support our mates through hard times. We succeed when everyone works together.

Suicide and the elderly

Suicide is often seen as a young man’s epidemic, but the latest statistics show that older Australian men are now more likely to take their own life than Australians of any other age group. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2012, the highest rate of suicide was for men aged 85 and older, at 37.6 suicides per 100,000. This is more than triple the national rate.

Any death by suicide is tragic. Unfortunately, it is difficult to accurately assess suicide rates in the ex-serving community. DVA does not hold records of all veterans who have served with the Australian Defence Force only those who have lodged a claim for benefits or services. Generally, DVA only considers that a person served in the ADF if they deployed to a contemporary conflict, personnel deployed to Rwanda, families of Vietnam veterans and Mothers in the Middle East Area of Operations.

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Techniques for the DVA strategic research model

DVA’s Applied Research Programme generates best practice research into the health and wellbeing needs of Australia’s veteran community and seeks ways to improve services and care. Changes to DVA’s strategic research model were implemented in July 2013 to improve the availability and quality of evidence-based research. The new model is now fully operational and is enabling DVA to undertake a more hands-on approach in managing the development and implementation of research affecting the veteran community.

DVA’s strategic research model makes it easier to collaborate with other agencies and researchers, particularly with the Department of Defence. DVA and Defence are actively working together on a number of large shared projects to provide insight into the short and long-term health and wellbeing of serving and ex-serving personnel.

The new model enables more focused evidence-based research in four domains:

- longitudinal studies – these studies assess health outcomes in veteran populations over time;
- predictive modelling – these studies use data to forecast trends and patterns in the veteran community;
- families – these studies focus on the health and wellbeing of families of veterans;
- interventions – these studies assess the effectiveness of health related programmes and services designed to assist veterans in their daily lives.

The research needs identified by DVA in consultation with our relevant research partners (research institutions, universities, overseas government veterans agencies, ex-service organisations and internal business areas) is a driving force behind each research project.

Applied research is a major strategic priority for DVA and the current programme contains an assortment of projects to assist DVA maintain its place at the forefront of veteran research both in Australia and within the international arena.

Further information about the Applied Research Programme is available on the DVA website at www.dva.gov.au/health_and_wellbeing/research/arp/Pages/index.aspx or email the research team at research@dva.gov.au

Families and the elderly

Families Counselling Service (VVCS) offer advice on how to prevent suicide.

Some of the warning signs of suicide amongst elderly people include:

- Loss of interest in things or activities they usually found enjoyable
- Cutting back social interaction, self-care, and grooming
- Breaking medical regimens (for example, going off diets and/or prescriptions)
- Experiencing or expecting a significant personal loss (for example, the death of a spouse)
- Feeling hopeless and/or worthless (“Who needs me?”)
- Putting affairs in order, giving things away, or making changes in wills
- Stock-piling medication or obtaining other lethal means.

It is OK to ask the question “Are you thinking of suicide?” as it gives permission for the person to talk about what they might have been considering. The next step is to listen, make sure they are safe, and help them get the support and services they need. Suicide is in danger, call emergency services, as Triple Zero staff are experienced at handling suicidal callers.

The key to good mental health is to take action early:

- Stay active and connected
- Go online to DVA’s mental health portal At Ease www.at-ease.dva.gov.au
- Talk to your GP
- Talk to VVCS on 1800 011 046, 24 hours a day.

Improvements to the DVA strategic research model

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Senator the Hon. Michael Ronaldson speaks at the launch on 11 June.

No matter what your age, looking out for the signs of suicide in someone you love is essential. If you or someone you know is in danger, call emergency services, as Triple Zero staff are experienced at handling suicidal callers.

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