Keeping the glass half full

DR GRAEME KILLER AO
PRINCIPAL MEDICAL ADVISER

Talking about mental health again does seem a bit dreary and repetitive, but in the veteran scene it is the most important health challenge at this time. The good news is, in many ways, we are all pulling together to meet the challenge. Veteran and ex-service support groups are stepping up in many locations, while Defence and DVA are investing in important research, and redesigning mental health programs to suit the needs of contemporary veterans.

New evidence-based mental health treatment programs have been trialed overseas and are producing highly encouraging outcomes, and we are looking to introduce these into our programs. However, we need to remember that challenging exercise programs and treks (and alike) from various service groups may be helpful, but should not stand alone and are no substitute for an evidence-based treatment program within Defence and DVA. I think the message here is that professionals and support groups need to talk to one another and work together.

In recent times, there has been a bit of a mental health catharsis, with mental health topics and personal journeys flooding the print, radio and social media. This is certainly a move in the right direction because it means, as individuals come forward to tell their stories, some of the stigma associated with mental health is declining. It also sends another important message that mental health problems are independent of rank and status and none of us is really immune. It is also important to say that most of us are stressed from time to time, but we usually deal with problems ourselves (in our own way) without the need for help. This is not good or bad – it’s just the reality of human behaviour.

Statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) indicate that 20 per cent of Australians will have a mental health problem at any one time. Of course, these statistics fail to tell the true story and fail to lift the lid on the not-so-talked-about matters that often underlie mental health cases, such as domestic violence. These issues involve not just the individuals, but counsellors, immediate and wider family members, and of course services and the law. Threats towards others – including wives and children – are not an uncommon occurrence, and mental health issues penetrate deep into the community.

If we look back to the immediate post-Vietnam era, it is fair to say that our understanding and treatment of mental health problems has improved immeasurably. In a way we can thank the Vietnam veterans who never gave up pushing us to look for more appropriate services and outcomes. There is unquestionably an ongoing and contemporary challenge in mental health, and while we will not satisfy everyone, the signs are positive. In most cases, services are being provided to meet the mental health needs of veterans and their families. I think it’s fair to say that the cup is half full – it is certainly not half empty – and we are making a positive difference.

Release of Middle East Area of Operations Health Studies

The Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO) Census and Prospective Health Studies were launched by the Chief of the Defence Force on 8 August 2013. These studies are part of the Military Health Outcomes Program (MHHOP), a significant body of research commissioned by the Department of Defence to determine the impact of operational deployment on the health and wellbeing of servicemen and women.

The studies provide DVA and Defence with a wealth of current data.

The results suggest that ADF members deployed to the MEAO are generally physically and mentally healthy. However, members repeatedly exposed to traumatic experiences, either at home or on deployment, are more likely to develop mental health concerns.

The findings support work already undertaken by DVA to improve access to services, streamline the compensation claims process and expand access to mental health treatment, and reinforce the Department’s approach to high-quality mental health care in line with the ten-year Veteran Mental Health Strategy released in May 2013.

DVA spends around $166 million per year on mental health services and offers online mental health information and support, GP services, psychologist and social work services, specialist psychiatric services, pharmacies, PTSD programs, and hospital services for those who need it.

DVA will pay for treatment for eligible veterans (including those with operational service in the MEAO) for diagnosed PTSD, anxiety and depression without the need to lodge a compensation claim. Help is also available through the free and confidential Vet and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCs). VVCs can be contacted 24 hours a day across Australia on 1800 011 046.

DVA also provides self-help information for the ex-service community through a range of online resources via the At Ease website www.at-ease.dva.gov.au.

DVA continues to seek opportunities to improve and evolve service models to meet the needs of clients and will use the studies’ findings to help inform future research priorities within DVA’s Applied Research Program.

Further information on the studies and access to the reports is available via the Department of Defence’s Military Health Outcomes Program webpage at www.defence.gov.au/health/home/-/MHHOP-Message.htm.

Safety checking of RAP electrical equipment

Members of the veteran community who have electrically operated equipment on loan under DVA’s Rehabilitation Appliances Program (RAP) may be contacted by the supplier to arrange an annual “testing and tagging” of items.

Testing will only be carried out on items issued under RAP, and suppliers will only be responsible for checking their own equipment. If you have more than one item, it is possible that they are on loan from different suppliers, so you could be contacted by more than one supplier. If you haven’t been contacted by the supplier about your equipment, you are able to approach them directly and advise them if you have concerns.

MyAccount for Nominated Representatives

Nominated Representatives are now able to log on to view or manage a veteran’s record online.

What is this online service?

Since May 2012, veterans have been able to access DVA services online through MyAccount.

From September this year, anyone who helps with a veteran’s affairs on a day-to-day basis will be able to create their own MyAccount to view or manage a DVA client’s information and services online.

And, in the coming months, claim representatives will also be able to use My Account for their claim requirements.

Who can establish an account?

Spouses, children, trustees, agents, or legal representatives holding Power of Attorney (and who can provide written consent) can apply to access the veteran’s account.

How does it work?

Depending on the type of permission the client has granted, nominated representatives will have access to view and/or make changes to the client’s information online and engage with the relevant DVA services. This may include viewing payment information, updating details, organising transport services, submitting applications for reimbursements and viewing accepted medical conditions.

How to get an account?

Representative requests can be made by the client or their representative online via DVA’s new Nominated Representative portal on the DVA website.

Further information can be found at www.myaccount.dva.gov.au/representative or by contacting DVA on 133 254 or from regional Australia free call 1800 555 254.