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Invited Perspective

Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders in Geriatric US Military Veterans

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Williamson et al.¹ from the Kings Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London report in this issue the first comprehensive review and meta-analysis of the prevalence of mental health disorders in elderly US veterans. A broad computer search by the authors of electronic data bases yielded 11 high quality studies each with a mean age ≥ 65 , large sample sizes (>450), with estimates of mental health disorder prevalence among US military veterans. These 11 studies were dated 2000-2016 and involved 1,612,073 participants with an average age range of 69-84 years. Most study participants were male. The authors examined the prevalence of eight mental disorders in these 11 studies: Depression, PTSD, Substance abuse, Alcohol Use Disorder, Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder, Anxiety Disorders, and Dementia. High heterogeneity in results was found between these 11 studies reflecting considerable methodological and recruitment variability. To account for the heterogeneity between studies, a random-effects model was employed for statistical analysis and differences in study methodology were described in detail by the authors.

Williamson et al.¹ found the prevalence of depression among veterans to be 13.4%, with most estimates ranging between 3% and 19%, compared to referenced global geriatric depression estimates ranging between 1% and 42%. The pooled prevalence of PTSD across the 11 veteran studies was 8.4% compared to community geriatric samples in the US, European, and Australia estimated at 2-10%. The authors found higher prevalence rates of Substance Abuse (5.7%) and Alcohol Use Disorders (5.4%) in US Veterans compared to estimates of the same disorders in the US general geriatric population (2.2% and 2.4% respectively). The prevalence of geriatric bipolar disorder in veterans was 3.9% but studies recruiting veterans from non-mental health clinical sites found estimates of 0.2-2.9%, consistent with general geriatric US prevalence estimates of bipolar disorder. The pooled prevalence of schizophrenia was 11% among the 11 veteran studies, but these included two studies with high prevalence rates that had recruited from veteran samples enriched with individuals with severe and persistent mental illness. Finally, the prevalence of dementia in geriatric veterans was 10.7% which is consistent with US community samples of elders.

As noted above, considerable heterogeneity across the relatively few ($n=11$) high quality studies included in the meta-analysis limits confidence in the conclusions regarding prevalence of mental health

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