

Prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Aging Vietnam-Era Veterans: Veterans Administration Cooperative Study 569: Course and Consequences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnam-Era Veteran Twins

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Objective: *The prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among aging Vietnam-era veterans is not well characterized. Methods:* *In a cross-sectional study, 5,598 male Vietnam-era veterans and members of the Vietnam Era Twin Registry were assessed for PTSD using the Composite International Diagnostic Interview. Current symptoms were measured with the PTSD Checklist (PCL). PTSD was estimated according to age (<60 or ≥ 60) and Vietnam theater service. Results:* *The lifetime prevalence of PTSD in theater veterans aged at least 60 years was 16.9% (95% CI: 13.9%–20.5%) and higher than the 5.5% (95% CI: 4.3%–7.0%) among nontheater veterans. Among veterans younger than 60 years, the comparable prevalence was 22.0% for theater (95% CI: 16.7%–28.4%) and 15.7% for nontheater (95% CI: 13.4%–18.2%) veterans. Similar results were found for theater service and current PTSD prevalence (past 12 months). PCL scores were significantly higher in theater compared with nontheater veterans in both younger and older cohorts. In both the younger and older cohorts significant differences in lifetime and current PTSD prevalence and PCL scores persisted in theater service discordant twin pairs.*

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Conclusion: *Vietnam service is related to elevated PTSD prevalence and current symptom burden in aging veterans. More than 30 years after the end of the Vietnam conflict, many veterans continue to suffer from PTSD, which highlights the need for continuing outreach throughout the life course.* (Am J Geriatr Psychiatry 2015; ■:■-■)

Key Words: Epidemiology, geriatric/aging/elderly, PTSD/posttraumatic stress disorder, twin studies, trauma

INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War impacted the lives of nearly 3 million U.S. veterans. A particularly insidious consequence of the war is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹ In 1990, the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS) estimated the prevalence of current and lifetime PTSD in Vietnam-era veterans.² These cross-sectional findings reflected the status of Vietnam-era veterans when they were in their thirties and forties. Now, more than 20 years later, Vietnam-era veterans are in late middle age, and the prevalence of PTSD in these veterans is not well characterized.

A study in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* for the first time provided prevalence estimates for PTSD in the older (>60) U.S. population.³ For older men they estimated that 7.4% had a lifetime history of full or partial PTSD among individuals exposed to a traumatic event. PTSD continues to be a common diagnosis among Vietnam-era veterans within the Veterans Administration (VA) health system. From 2007 to 2009, 366,317 Vietnam-era veterans had a diagnosis of PTSD within the Department of Veterans Affairs health system⁴; this represents a treated prevalence of 15.8% of all Vietnam-era veterans seen in the system. However, there are currently no estimates of the prevalence in the larger community of aging Vietnam-era veterans. This is important because there may be veterans who are either not receiving treatment or receiving treatment outside the VA system.

The purpose of this study was to estimate the prevalence of PTSD in younger (<60) and older (≥60) Vietnam-era veterans. We evaluated PTSD in veterans in the Vietnam-Era Twin (VET) Registry, which was constructed from military discharge records in

the mid-1980s.⁵ We assessed lifetime and current prevalence in 2011–2012 according to age cohort, service in the Vietnam theater of operations, and combat exposure.

METHODS

Setting

The VET Registry is the source of Vietnam-era veterans (military service between 1964 and 1975) for this study. The VET Registry is a national sample of male twins assembled in the 1980s and has been used as a platform for physical and mental health research.^{5–7} Members of the VET Registry were born from 1939 through 1957.

Design

The Course and Consequences of PTSD in Vietnam-Era Twins (VA Cooperative Study 569) is an observational study of PTSD among veterans. A mailed questionnaire obtained general health information and PTSD symptoms; a telephone interview used a structured psychiatric interview to diagnose PTSD.

Subjects

All members of the VET Registry who had entered military service in 1965 or later and who were known to be alive and had not withdrawn from the Registry were recruited to participate in this study. We used the enlistment year restriction because the Registry was assembled based on computerized military discharge records that did not become available until 1968. Study-specific informed consent was obtained from all participating VET Registry members, and the

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