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Thursday, May 24, 2007

[Veterans Health Care](#)

Hearing on Mental Health Problems Confronting Soldiers Returning from Iraq, Afghanistan

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On Thursday, May 24, 2007, the Committee held an oversight hearing on mental health problems confronting soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The Committee heard from afflicted soldiers and their families, examined the ability of the DOD and the VA to screen, treat, and track returning soldiers who are at risk, and assessed the impact that these illnesses are having on military readiness and military families. [A preliminary transcript of this hearing is now](#)

[available.](#)

Hundreds of thousands of soldiers will likely need mental health screening or treatment. According to expert witnesses, a significant percentage of the 1.5 million soldiers that have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan either have returned or will return from battle suffering from mental health problems. Army surveys from 2004 indicate that 20% of returning soldiers suffered from clinical anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder. More recent assessments have found that half of National Guard troops returning from battle report mental health concerns.

Readiness problems increase the risk of mental health problems. Because of lack of available troops, an increasing number of soldiers are serving second and even third deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and deployment times are increasing to as long as fifteen months. These deployments dramatically increase the risk that soldiers will come home with mental health problems. One of the witnesses at the hearing, Dr. John Fairbank, testified that “multiple tours and extended tours increase ... the probability of developing adverse psychological reactions.” The Committee heard the testimony of one soldier, Army Specialist Thomas Smith, who was diagnosed with PTSD yet was still ordered to return to Iraq.

Barriers to adequate mental health care. Independent experts have identified numerous problems with treatment of mental health conditions by DOD and VA, with the DOD Mental Health Task Force concluding that “the military system does not have enough resources or fully trained people to fulfill its broad mission of supporting psychological health in peacetime and fulfill the greater requirements during times of conflict.” Army Specialists Michael Bloodworth and Thomas Smith described another key barrier to adequate psychological care for ailing soldiers: the stigma that prevents many soldiers from seeking help for mental health concerns.

Mental health problems among returning soldiers will have a significant impact on families and the civilian healthcare system. These illnesses can have a devastating effect on soldiers and their families, including many of the 700,000 children in the United States who have had least one parent deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Dr. Thomas Insel, head of the National Institute of Mental Health, described the “ripple effect of mental illnesses on family members,” noting that “this is not simply a problem for the VA or DOD ... the burden of illness ... will spill over to the public sector to mental health care in the civilian sector.”

Panel One



Army Specialist Thomas Smith

Richard and Carol Coons, Parents of Army Master Sergeant James Coons

Tammie LeCompte, Wife of Army Specialist Ryan LeCompte

Army Specialist Michael Bloodworth

Panel Two

Dr. Thomas Insel, Director, National Institute of Mental Health







Dr. Michael E. Kilpatrick, Department of Defense, Deputy Director, Deployment Health Support, accompanied by Dr. Jack Smith, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Clinical and Program Policy

Dr. Antonette Zeiss, Department of Veterans Affairs, Deputy Chief Consultant, Office of Mental Health Services, accompanied by Dr. Al Batres, Chief Officer, Office of Readjustment Counseling

Dr. John A. Fairbank, Duke University, Member, Institute of Medicine Committee on Veterans' Compensation for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Major General Gale S. Pollock, Army Surgeon General

Documents and Links

-  [Testimony of Coons Family](#) (30 KB)
-  [Testimony of Michael Kilpatrick](#) (54 KB)
-  [Testimony of Thomas Insel](#) (83 KB)
-  [Testimony of Antonette Zeiss](#) (53 KB)
-  [Testimony of John Fairbank](#) (45 KB)
-  [Written Statement from Los Angeles County Dept. of Mental Health](#) (2 MB)
-  [Written Statement of Toni Reinis](#) (63 KB)
-  [Preliminary Hearing Transcript](#) (8 MB)

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