

The Two-Way - NPR's News Blog

Military Mental Health Probe Widens After NPR-ProPublica Report

06:36 pm

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by T. CHRISTIAN MILLER, PROPUBLICA, AND DANIEL ZWERDLING, NPR

Responding to an [investigation by ProPublica and NPR](#), the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee said Friday that he would expand a hearing on soldier suicides to include a more extensive discussion of the military's handling of traumatic brain injuries and post traumatic stress disorder.

"The recent NPR and ProPublica reports on the military's diagnosis, treatment, and tracking of traumatic brain injuries are concerning," [Sen. Carl Levin](#), D-Mich., said in a prepared statement.

NPR and ProPublica reported this week that the military was failing to diagnose soldiers with [so-called mild traumatic brain injuries](#). Such injuries, also called concussions, are typically difficult to detect but can cause lasting mental and physical difficulties.

Unpublished military studies and interviews with medical officials suggest there could be tens of thousands of soldiers suffering undiagnosed traumatic brain injuries, which have been called one of the wars' signature wounds. When soldiers were diagnosed, [many received little or no treatment](#), even at large bases [such as Fort Bliss](#) in El Paso, Texas.

Official military statistics say 115,000 soldiers have suffered a mild traumatic brain injury [since the wars began](#). But in interviews, top Army medical officials acknowledged that those figures understate the true number.

Civilian studies suggest up to 15 percent of people with mild traumatic brain injuries experience lingering problems with memory, concentration, sleep and balance problems.

"While the Department of Defense and the military services have made progress toward increasing knowledge about and awareness of the causes, diagnosis, and treatment of traumatic brain injuries, there is still a good deal to learn, both in the military and civilian medical environments," Levin said in his statement.

Levin's spokeswoman said the hearing will take place later this month, though the date has not been finalized. It will look at the complex web of illnesses that have afflicted troops returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the role those disorders play in soldier suicides. The issue has been a growing concern in the military.

Soldiers with traumatic brain injury often also suffer from post traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, a debilitating psychological wound. Those who survive roadside blasts can suffer both a brain injury and PTSD, which can be triggered by the terror of the event.

"Traumatic brain injury, post traumatic stress, and suicide are all related issues, at times making diagnosis difficult," Levin said in his statement.

Army officials said they have been working to improve their systems to diagnose soldiers. They said soldiers with brain injuries have received appropriate treatment.

[In an interview earlier this week](#), Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the Army's vice chief of staff, said the military took traumatic brain injuries "extremely seriously."

Chiarelli, who has worked to raise awareness about the severity of so-called invisible wounds such as mild traumatic brain injury and PTSD, said medical officials must diagnose and treat a complicated mix of illnesses.

"It's time we realize that TBI and PTSD are real injuries," Chiarelli told "Talk of the Nation" host Neal Conan. "We've got to ensure our soldiers get the care that they need."

Tags: [suicide](#), [mental health](#), [Afghanistan](#), [NPR](#), [Military](#), [health care](#), [ProPublica](#), [Iraq](#)

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Harriet Greene (harriet0352) wrote:

Well, it's about time someone decided to look into this nightmare! Worse than not diagnosing TBI and PTSD is the fact that after a diagnosis is confirmed, the military still refuses to deal with it properly. I'm really tired of hearing all the generals talk about how much they care and how they are going to make changes. I happen to know that some know of specific cases and deliberately look the other way!!! I guess it takes someone with power to get their attention. Sen Levin never responded to my letter sent last November. I'm glad to see he's listening now. Sadly, many lives have been lost to suicide or destroyed since that time.....I hope these discussions take place quickly before any more lives are lost.

Friday, June 11, 2010 10:04:50 PM

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Sue Denim (Poster) wrote:

Personally, I think its time to stop labeling normal reactions to horrible events (PTSD) as being a "mental illness". That label makes a connotation that there is something wrong or "ill" about the person who is trying to cope with an outside event that affected them. There is no "illness" about being deeply affected by battlefield experience. I would even accept something along the lines of "psychological wound" over the ridiculously broad parameters of what is defined as "mental illness". Sorry Penny, if you read the DSM-R (Psychiatry's Bible), they have it arranged so that every emotion and reaction can be tied to a "mental illness" Psychiatry as a whole IS about money. These troops are most likley falling through the cracks because PTSD is NOT a life long problem if treated properly. If they can't pin a person for being "chemically imbalanced" and requiring long term or life long treatment, the person gets no help. If there is evidence of outside causes, Psychiatry can no longer claim the problem is the patient's brain.

Friday, June 11, 2010 8:22:05 PM

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Penny Lane (dazzlingurbanite) wrote:

This is either about the macho "there is no such thing as mental illness" or it is about money. Either way, time to stop the denial about the real costs of fighting a war. Rethink Afghanistan please.

Friday, June 11, 2010 7:15:53 PM

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