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Report examines combat stress care of women vets

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The Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General released a report studying the growing number of women who suffer from combat stress.

Among veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, a smaller percentage of women than men were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, while a higher percentage were diagnosed with depression.

That's according to a report requested by Sen. Mark R. Warner and prepared by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General.

Although women aren't assigned to units primarily engaged in direct ground combat, many female veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from the same combat stress as their male counterparts.

Warner was hearing that the Department of Veterans Affairs was not fully taking care of those women, so he called for a study of the growing number of women who suffer from combat stress. He will tour the Hampton VA Monday to talk about the report.

Genevieve Chase, executive director of the nonprofit American Women Veterans, applauded Warner's effort to get the study funded.

"Now that we have the facts, we need to analyze it," she said.

The study looked at 246,976 veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and 246,080 who served elsewhere.

Among those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, about 12 percent of active female veterans and about 16 percent of reserve unit female veterans were diagnosed with PTSD, compared to about 17 percent of active and reserve male veterans.

Women were denied PTSD claims more often than men, while men were denied claims for other mental health conditions more often than women. The report identified no gender bias in the claim denials. Decisions were consistent with medical evidence and current policies and procedures, the report said.

Changes to the Veterans Benefits Administration's PTSD policy will enable more men and women to qualify for PTSD benefits. Before July, the administration assumed that veterans who had received certain combat decorations had engaged in combat and thus were more likely to have experienced a traumatic event that triggered their PTSD.

The Defense Department excludes women from assignments to units whose primary mission is to engage in direct ground combat, so men are more likely than women to receive combat-related decorations.

Now, the VA's starting assumption is that all veterans assigned to a combat zone had experiences that could lead to PTSD even if they did not receive combat decorations.

About 23 percent of active female veterans and 19 percent of reserve unit female veterans were diagnosed with depression, compared to 14 percent of active men and 12 percent of reserve unit men.

Chase thinks that some of those women may have been misdiagnosed and actually have PTSD.

"We need to find them and let them know that they can be screened" now that the policy has changed, she said. PTSD "has to be treated, not depression. Depression is treated in different ways."

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