Pain among Veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom

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ABSTRACT

Objective. Pain is one of the most frequently reported symptoms by veterans returning from recent overseas military actions. The purpose of the current study was to obtain a preliminary estimate of the prevalence and severity of pain among veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF; N = 970). The demographic, etiologic, and diagnostic characteristics of 100 veterans with moderate to severe chronic pain conditions were examined in order to provide a description of this new group of pain patients.

Design. This was a historical cohort study that utilized electronic medical record review for all data collection.

Patients. All registered OEF/OIF veterans seeking treatment at a Southeastern Veterans’ Affairs medical center were included in the initial cohort. In order to describe the characteristics of those with clinically significant pain, 100 veterans were randomly sampled from the subset of patients who reported moderate to severe chronic pain intensity during a medical visit (N = 219).

Results. Approximately 47% of veterans whose charts included pain score documentation (N = 793) reported at least a mild level of current pain. Moderate to severe pain intensity was recorded for 28% (N = 219) of those in the initial cohort with pain scores. Diagnoses of musculoskeletal and connective tissue disorders were recorded for 82% of those with chronic conditions (i.e., duration ≥1 month).

Conclusions. The results of this preliminary study suggest that a substantial percentage of OEF/OIF veterans will experience clinically significant pain following their military service.

Key Words. Pain; Epidemiology; Veterans

Introduction

Pain is one of the most frequently reported symptoms by veterans returning from recent overseas military actions. Epidemiological studies of several Persian Gulf War (PGW) clinical and military registries have consistently found pain symptoms and diagnoses to be among the most prevalent medical conditions reported since the cease-fire in 1991. A recent survey of 15,000 PGW veterans representing all military branches revealed high prevalence rates of headaches (54%), joint pain (45%), back pain (44%), muscle pain (33%), and abdominal pain (23%) [1]. Among individuals enrolled in Department of Veterans’ Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DOD) PGW clinical registries, the most frequently diagnosed medical conditions are musculoskeletal and connective tissue diseases (25% and 36%, respectively) [2,3]. Factor analyses of all medically unexplained symptoms reported by PGW veterans have repeatedly revealed a distinct factor that was heavily loaded with pain and related somatic symptoms and has been labeled arthro-myo-neuropathy [4], dysesthesia [5], musculoskeletal [6], and somatization [7]. While these symptom clusters have not proven to be unique to PGW-era veterans who

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