

Caregiver's Corner Column (November 2014)

Veterans and Dementia

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According to the 2012 U.S. Census Bureau, there are over 21 million veterans living in the United States. Nearly half, 9.6 million are age 65 and older. “The highest percentage of veterans (80%) occurs among men now 85 to 89, who would have been just entering their late teens during WWII”. We know that Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia and that age is the number one risk factor. For some veterans, studies suggest there may be additional risk factors for developing dementia.

Researchers are currently examining possible links between Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and dementia. PTSD, a type of anxiety disorder, can develop after an individual experiences or witnesses a traumatic or life threatening event and feels intense fear, horror or helplessness. TBI can occur when the head is hit suddenly and violently or when an object pierces the skull and penetrates the brain or when the person is in close proximity to an explosion. Both PTSD and TBI are conditions that can result from exposure to combat situations.

Various studies exploring possible relationships between PTSD, TBI and dementia report that older veterans that have experienced a TBI were 60% more likely to develop dementia and on average developed dementia two years earlier than veterans without a TBI diagnosis. Additionally, veterans that were diagnosed with PTSD were almost twice as likely to develop dementia compared to veterans without PTSD. None of the studies concluded that a diagnosis of PTSD or TBI *caused* dementia, but recognize these conditions as possible risk factors that requires further study and research.

Symptoms of PTSD usually emerge shortly after the traumatic event; however some individuals may experience them years later. In some cases, it has been noted that symptoms of PTSD did not surface until after the veteran began showing signs of cognitive decline or dementia.

According to an article in the February 2000 Journal of Neuropsychiatry “The co-occurrence of PTSD and dementia ... suggests that the men were able to manage their PTSD symptoms for decades but lost that ability as dementia developed”. As dementia progresses, even individuals without a diagnosis of PTSD will experience difficulty differentiating past from present events and frequently blend the two. This could explain the challenges facing someone with dementia that might be “re-living” an unpleasant or traumatic event as if it just occurred.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recognizes the challenges that caregivers of veterans with disabilities often face and has established a number of caregiver support services. There is a designated toll free Caregiver Support Line that caregivers can call with questions about what services they may be eligible for. Some of the services available for qualifying veterans include Adult Day Health Care, Home-Based Primary Care, Skilled Home Care, Homemaker and Home

Health Aide Program, Home Telehealth, Respite Care and Home Hospice Care. Additional services and benefits may be available for spouses of veterans.

The VA's toll free ***Caregiver Support Line is 1-855-260-3274***. Additional information is available on-line at www.va.gov. The Alzheimer's Association can also provide local support and education for caregivers of persons with dementia. For more information call the **Alzheimer's Association Helpline at 1-800-272-3900** or visit our website at www.alz.org.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.