

WRIISC *Advantage*

FALL 2023

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- ▶ Volunteer for WRIISC Research Studies
- ▶ Refining Care for Women Veterans
- ▶ Furthering Exposure Education for Providers

Common Questions about
RESEARCH



THIS EDITION OF WRIISC ADVANTAGE NEWSLETTER INCLUDES DETAILS ABOUT WRIISC RESEARCH STUDIES THAT ARE CURRENTLY ACCEPTING VOLUNTEERS, STRIDES IN CARE FOR WOMEN VETERANS AND THOSE WITH ENVIRONMENTAL EXPOSURE CONCERNS AND MUCH MORE...

▼ DIRECTORS' CORNER

WRIISC research studies play a crucial role in addressing the unique and pressing needs of all Veterans with deployment-related health concerns. It is Veterans' participation in research studies that leads to a better understanding of symptoms and conditions related to deployment, and aids in the development of better treatments and symptom management therapies. In essence, research is an invaluable tool that helps ensure that Veterans receive the care and opportunities they rightfully deserve. Improving Veteran health and wellness is a collaborative effort driven by the need to translate research data into effective, quality, patient-centered clinical care. Continuing to secure Veteran participation in research is a vital step in that process.

Helena Chandler PhD
Director, NJ WRIISC

Matt Reinhard, PsyD
Director, DC WRIISC

Wes Ashford, MD, PhD
Director, CA WRIISC

Common Questions about Research Participation

What are benefits of participating in a research study for a Veteran?

- ★ Opportunity to participate in new, experimental treatments before they are widely available.
- ★ Some studies offer compensation for your time and expenses.
- ★ Many Veterans find it personally rewarding to add to a research study that may help others and advance the health of Veterans in the future.
- ★ Depending on the study, you may have access to regular check-ups and monitoring as part of the study that could help manage individual health or even lead to a new/different diagnosis for a health issue. However, these individual benefits are not guaranteed.



What are the key points for Veterans to remember when participating in a study?

- ★ Ask the research team members to be clear and concise in addressing any concerns during the study process.
- ★ Provide honest/truthful information – authentic responses are crucial for understanding and addressing the reality of the issues Veterans are facing. Honest responses bolster the validity of the research and its applicability to a larger community that may not be participating in the study.
- ★ Follow any instructions provided by the researchers laid out in the study's protocol.
- ★ Promptly report any discomfort, adverse effects, or unexpected issues during the study to the research team.
- ★ Remember that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.
- ★ Keep track of all documents related to your participation.
- ★ Provide feedback or suggestions about the study to the research team, as this could improve delivery of the study to future participants.

► Highlights stemming from WRIISC research were listed in the Spring 2022 edition of this newsletter: <https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/education/newsletter/WRIISC-newsletter-spring-2022.pdf>.

► From presentations to publications, we continue to share knowledge in the VA community to progress Veterans' health. **STAY TUNED FOR MORE!**

WRIISC Research Studies Accepting Volunteers

NJ WRIISC

FOR GULF WAR VETERANS

- **Examining Sources of Delayed Onset Physical Fatigue after Exercise in Gulf War Illness**

POPULATION: Gulf War Veterans (GWV)

PURPOSE: Understand the source of symptoms in Veterans with Gulf War Illness (GWI) that are made worse after exercise or strenuous exertion.

- **Collaborative Specialty Care for Gulf War Illness**

POPULATION: GWV

PURPOSE: Learn whether collaborative care among specialty providers can improve the health and quality of care of GWI.

- **Pulmonary Vascular Dysfunction after Deployment-Related Exposures**

POPULATION: OIF/OEF/OND Veterans

PURPOSE: Better understand what contributes to respiratory difficulties for Veterans with airborne exposures, even if traditional breathing tests are found to be normal.

- **Research on Blast Exposure and Lung Health**

POPULATION: OIF/OEF/OND Veterans

PURPOSE: Determine the potential effects of blast exposure on the lungs, heart, and blood vessels.

FOR VETERANS OF ALL ERAS

- **Health Coaching for Chronic Multi-Symptom Illness**

POPULATION: Veterans with chronic multi-symptom illness, including GWI

PURPOSE: To learn if health coaching improves outcomes for Veterans with chronic multi-symptom illness.

DC WRIISC

FOR GULF WAR VETERANS

- **Project IN-DEPTH: VA-NIH Investigative Deep Phenotyping (IN-DEPTH) of Gulf War Veteran Health**

POPULATION: Veterans of all eras

PURPOSE: Understand the biological reasons for the development of symptoms related to GWI.

FOR VETERANS OF ALL ERAS

- **Multi-modal observational study of Veterans with traumatic brain injury and varying symptoms (TOS-Study)**

POPULATION: Veterans of all eras

PURPOSE: Evaluate patterns of neural activity and behavior that predict military exposures.

- **Individualization of an exercise program guided by heart rate variability in Veterans with chronic multi-symptom illness**

POPULATION: Veterans of all eras

PURPOSE: Explore exercise interventions for Veterans with chronic multi-symptom illness (CMI)

CA WRIISC

FOR GULF WAR VETERANS

- **The Role of the Brain Stem in Gulf War Illness Pathology**

POPULATION: GWV with GWI

PURPOSE: Determine relationships between brain stem circuits, pain and sleep in GWI.

CONTACT: Halee Staggs (<https://tinyurl.com/BrainStemGWI>)

- **TMS in Alleviating Pain and Co-morbid Symptoms in GWI**

POPULATION: GWV

PURPOSE: Examine non-invasive brain stimulation in alleviating pain and co-morbid symptoms in GWV.

CONTACT: Kristina Smith (650) 512-8968

- **Validating Blood Biomarkers of Brain Immune and Metabolic Dysfunction in GWI**

POPULATION: GWV

PURPOSE: Determine a possible association between certain genes on learning and memory function among GWV.

CONTACT: Raj Brar (650) 493-5000 ext. 62179

FOR VETERANS OF ALL ERAS

- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Meditation Study**

POPULATION: Veterans with PTSD

PURPOSE: Compare the effectiveness of meditation to therapy for treating Veterans with PTSD.

CONTACT: Jasmin Francisco (<https://www.ptsresearch.org>)

For more information about any of these research studies, CONTACT the associated WRIISC site/listed contact or VISIT:

<https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/research/volunteer/index.asp>

VOLUNTEERING TO PARTICIPATE IN A WRIISC STUDY- WHAT NEXT?

VETERANS SHOULD CONSIDER several factors when getting involved in a WRIISC research study. WRIISC staff will address questions in detail when receiving an inquiry about a study and will be available to do so throughout the duration of the study. Below are key items WRIISC staff will cover with Veterans participating in research:

- ✓ A Veteran participating in research should understand a study's purpose (why is the study being done?) and objectives (what does the study aim to point out?).
- ✓ If a Veteran is still interested in volunteering to participate, the eligibility criteria will be confirmed to ensure the necessary qualifications for the study are met.
- ✓ Some research projects require a larger time investment than others, so it is necessary to make sure a Veteran agrees with the time commitment required to fully participate in the study.
- ✓ The Veteran must read and sign an informed consent document. This document ensures that



the risks and benefits of participation in a study are clear and understood by the Veteran participant.

- ✓ After the informed consent is signed, the Veteran can begin study enrollment/participation and will be provided with any next steps.

TO ALL VETERANS: By participating in a WRIISC research study, you can contribute to the process of improving quality of care and health outcomes in the Veteran community. On an individual level, you may find that participation in research studies provides personal satisfaction and some potential benefits (as noted above). We appreciate your consideration of involvement in our projects and commitment to help us make a difference!

RESEARCH MATTERS

WRIISC continues to conduct research that relates to Veterans' health. Below is a study conducted by the NJ WRIISC research team.

PUBLICATION TITLE: Deployed Veterans exhibit distinct respiratory patterns and greater dyspnea during maximal cardiopulmonary exercise: A case-control study

QUESTION: Are there distinct respiratory patterns in Veterans deployed to Southwest Asia (SWA) in comparison to those who were not deployed?

FINDINGS: Veterans deployed to SWA showed reduced rate and depth of breathing during exercise and greater dyspnea (shortness of breath) during the most intense stages of effort. Additionally, relationships between variables measured to determine the above were only seen in deployed Veterans.

MEANING: This study supports the relationship between SWA deployment and affected respiratory health found in previous research studies, and also highlights the usefulness of exercise testing in the clinical evaluation of deployment-related dyspnea in Veterans.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: This publication appears in the journal PLOS One in May 2023. Authors from the NJ WRIISC included: Alexander, T., Watson, M.A., Klein-Adams, J.C., Ndirangu, D.S., Serrador, J.M., Falvo, M.J

HIGHLIGHTING WRIISC COLLABORATORS

PARTNERING WITH INDIVIDUALS AND TEAMS ACROSS VA, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE (DOD) AND OTHER FEDERAL AGENCIES, AS WELL AS UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS CONTINUES TO BE CRITICAL TO ADVANCEMENT IN THE FIELD OF VETERANS HEALTH.

Shannon Nugent, PhD is an investigator at the VA Portland Healthcare System, Center to Improve Veteran Involvement in Care (CIVIC) and an Assistant Professor at Oregon Health and Science University in the Department of Psychiatry. She completed her PhD in Clinical Health Psychology from the University of Colorado Denver in 2015 and completed a two-year health services research fellowship with CIVIC in 2018. Dr. Nugent is broadly interested in understanding and improving mental health outcomes among individuals with serious and poorly understood medical conditions, such as cancer, Gulf War Illness, and Long-COVID. Dr. Nugent is in her final year of a five-year Mentored Research Scholar Grant from the American Cancer Society, "Survivors of Head and Neck Cancer: Optimizing Pain Management." She is also a lead or co-lead of two VA Health Services Research and Development studies that aim to enhance care for Veterans with Gulf War Illness and Long-COVID, respectively. In addition, she has received funding from the National Cancer Institute.

Since 2021, Dr. Nugent has collaborated with Dr. Lisa McAndrew and the NJ WRIISC team. In 2022, Drs. McAndrew and Nugent were awarded a VA Office of Research and Development Wide Collaborative Merit Grant "Leveraging knowledge of Chronic Multisymptom Illness to improve care for Veterans post-COVID." In addition, Dr. Nugent is collaborating on an invited Military Research Innovation Center application, for which she is leading one of 4 interconnected projects: "Enhancing Quality of Care for Gulf War Illness through Clinician Awareness and Support." Finally, Dr. Nugent is leading a public awareness campaign for Exposure Informed Health Care, in collaboration with the WRIISC, which will launch in 2024. We are happy to have forged a close collaboration/brought in additional expertise to support our mission.



Thank you, Dr Nugent, for collaborating with the WRIISC to improve health care experiences and health outcomes for Veterans!

Refining Care for Women Veterans

VA RECENTLY COMMEMORATED providing a century of dedicated healthcare to women who served. In fact, women Veterans are the fastest growing group across all Veteran branches and will represent 18% of the Veteran population by 2040. Despite this, there is an overall lack of studies focused on women's reproductive health, traumatic brain injury (TBI) and exposure related health effects. The WRIISC remains on the front lines of responding to women with deployment related symptoms and conditions to provide refined care for women Veterans.

The Women's Operational Military Exposure Network (WOMEN) at the CA WRIISC recently partnered with the VA Polytrauma Systems of Care department to host an accredited conference over September 26th and 27th. This first-time event took place both in-person, for local attendees at VA Palo Alto, and virtually, encouraging VA employees from across the country to tune in.

The two-day event provided educational content related to the sex differences in TBI symptoms, brain structure and function, and treatment in rehabilitation; recognizing the various types of deployment-related exposures that impact Veteran women's health; and discussing the strengths and weaknesses in current strategies being used to improve it. Attendees were able to view poster presentations from multiple ongoing projects and engage with top researchers in their fields from throughout the VA community.

Both organizations look forward to collaborating on similar initiatives in the near future and applying knowledge learned to best practices in the care of our women Veterans.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- ▶ [WRIISC Women's Operational Military Exposure Network \(WOMEN\)](https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/WRIISC-WOMEN/ww-about-us.asp) (<https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/WRIISC-WOMEN/ww-about-us.asp>)
- ▶ [Polytrauma/TBI System of Care Home \(va.gov\)](https://www.polytrauma.va.gov/) (<https://www.polytrauma.va.gov/>)

Around the WRIISC *News*

DC WRIISC

New Associate Director of Complex Exposure Threats Center (CETC)

THE DC WRIISC is pleased to welcome Dr. Jose (Joe) Ortiz, Colonel, US Army, Retired, to the DC team. Dr. Ortiz retired in June 2023 as the Chief of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (OEM) at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, after serving over 30 years on active duty. He then began at DC WRIISC in August 2023 to serve as the Associate Director of the Complex Exposure Threats Center (CETC).

Dr. Ortiz is an Assistant Professor at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS), Bethesda, Maryland, is Board Certified in Occupational Medicine and is a Fellow in the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. Dr. Ortiz's notable past military assignments include deployments to Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom), to



Kosovo (KFOR 12 Flight Surgeon), and to Croatia/Hungary (with the 67th Combat Support Hospital supporting Operation Joint Endeavor). He also served as the Army Surgeon General's Consultant for Occupational Health and Environmental Medicine and as the Associate Program Director for the Military Occupational Medicine Residency Program at the National Capitol Consortium.

Dr. Ortiz served as the Chief of Preventive Medicine with the 30th Medical Brigade in Afghanistan, as Chief of Preventive Medicine for the Army National Guard, and as the Command Surgeon for the Joint Munitions Command/Army Field Support Command. Dr. Ortiz's recognition for service includes the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star, the Defense Meritorious Medal, and the Army Staff Identification Badge. He graduated from Duke University as a Distinguished Military Graduate, completed medical School at USUHS with a Military Residency in Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

Dr. Ortiz's background and experience in environmental and occupational and military medicine will be invaluable at the WRIISC!

CA WRIISC

Introducing Santi Allende, PsyD, Associated Health Fellow

RECENTLY JOINING THE CA WRIISC team is Dr. Santi Allende, a licensed clinical psychologist and Associate Health Fellow. He also holds a postdoctoral appointment in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine.

Dr. Allende works with Dr. Peter Bayley and his team to evaluate how mind-body interventions for musculoskeletal pain work and investigate the mind-body connection in chronic conditions, such as chronic multisymptom illnesses. Two related areas of interest for Dr. Allende include better understanding how mental health and physical health interact and seeking to improve mental health care delivery in large healthcare systems.



One of the overarching aims of his work is to help integrate mind-body interventions into large healthcare systems. A recent publication by the Bayley Lab exemplifies these efforts. In this follow-up study, it was found that yoga, but not cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), was associated with long-term (6-month) reductions in pain among Veterans living with GWI. Dr. Allende's first author contributions to this publication were well-received by the International Association of Yoga Therapists Symposium on Yoga Research, as they awarded him the 2023 Young Investigator Award. He will be presenting a poster and a talk based on the publication at this year's fall conference held at the Kripalu Yoga Center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

Dr. Allende's an exceptional addition to the WRIISC team of experts!



NJ WRIISC

Education Information for Providers- They Spoke, We Listened!

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 throughout the VA has been fundamental in caring for Veterans. The longstanding missions of WRIISC and HOME are in line with PACT Act and prioritize providing quality health care to Veterans with military environmental exposures. In addition to our research and our clinical and communication initiatives, our comprehensive educational trainings are specifically tailored to support health care professionals in addressing the concerns of the over 40% of Veterans who seek our care for military exposures.



In the Spring 2022 addition of our WRIISC Advantage, we proudly announced our partnership with the American College of Preventative Medicine (ACPM) to offer both VA and Non-VA clinicians the opportunity to earn a Level 1 Certification in Military Environmental Exposures (MEE). To date, over 675 certifications (82% of those employed by VA) have been earned. This fall, the promised and long-awaited Level 2 MEE Certification Program has launched! This 10-module program, designed for practicing clinicians and taught by leading field experts, focuses on case-based learning of commonly reported military environmental exposures and further advances the foundational knowledge gained in the 5-module introductory Level 1 MEE Certification.

In recognition of the tremendous supportive educational impact that these Level 1 and Level 2 MEE Certification Programs offer to both clinicians and Veterans, WRIISC works collaboratively with fellow offices to promote their benefits. In fact, the VA has now required the modules which are part of Level 1 certifications for all Environmental Clinicians and Coordinators seeking to attend their annual Military Environmental Exposures Training Conferences.

For further information:

[Military Environmental Exposures Certification | ACPM](https://www.acpm.org/education-events/military-environmental-exposures-certification/) (<https://www.acpm.org/education-events/military-environmental-exposures-certification/>)

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VA



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Health Outcomes
Military Exposures



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Environmental Exposure Education Class Series For Veterans

SAVE THE DATES

March 7, 2024

“AIRBORNE HAZARDS AND BURN PITS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW,” discusses: 1) deployment-related airborne hazards -their identification and potential health concerns; 2) medical surveillance and health effects; and 3) health education.

MAY 16, 2024

“GULF WAR EXPOSURES & HEALTH CONCERNS: A CLASS FOR VETERANS,” covers: 1) deployment related exposures and their corresponding research findings; 2) health effects and the knowledge needed to identify relative symptoms; and 3) available resources and techniques for Veterans.

SEPTEMBER 26, 2024

“AGENT ORANGE: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW,” educates on: 1) the Agent Orange exposure; 2) the importance of deployment related exposure assessment and steps for determining deployment related environmental exposures; and 3) supporting resources for Veterans.

Registration Information Available Close to Each Class Date:

[www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/
education/local-offerings/nj-wriisc.asp](http://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/education/local-offerings/nj-wriisc.asp)

