

A National Newsletter for Veterans and their Health Care Providers

# WRIISC *Advantage*

Winter 2023

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**Startup of WRIISC-HOMEs Military Exposures Clinical Brief Series**

**Yoga as Treatment for Chronic Pain/Fatigue in Gulf War Veterans**

**Read about our  
PACT ACT RESPONSE**



THIS ISSUE OF **WRIISC ADVANTAGE** IS FOCUSED ON OUR PROMPT RESPONSE TO THE SERGEANT FIRST CLASS HEATH ROBINSON HONORING OUR PROMISE TO ADDRESS COMPREHENSIVE TOXICS (PACT) ACT OF 2022. THIS NEW LAW EXPANDS VA HEALTH CARE AND BENEFITS TO VETERANS FOR TOXIC ENVI-RONMENTAL EXPOSURES.

## DIRECTORS' CORNER

The recent passing of the PACT Act sparked positive change within the VA Health Care System including confirming VA's commitment to addressing toxic exposures and expanding the number of Veterans eligible for benefits for toxic exposure health concerns. War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) staff have always been committed to refining health care for all post-deployment related health concerns and now, more than ever, are inspired to make a difference in the health outcomes of Veterans with potentially harmful environmental exposures incurred during their service. WRIISC's response to the PACT Act involved planning, developing, and implementing new initiatives and fine-tuning those already in motion and ongoing. Each Veteran with toxic exposure concerns deserves the BEST care and, along with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and Health Outcomes Military Exposures (HOME), we will continue to strive towards ensuring this happens.

*Wes Ashford, MD, PhD*  
Director, CA WRIISC

*Helena Chandler, PhD*  
Director, NJ WRIISC

*Matt Reinhard, PsyD*  
Director, DC WRIISC

## WRIISC PACT ACT RESPONSE!

The following describes some of our new and most significant happenings directed at helping the health of Veterans with toxic exposure concerns. Some of these are geared towards educating providers and equipping them with best practices in addressing toxic exposures for Veterans post-deployment. All of them ultimately lead to providing Veterans with the best health care.

- **ESTABLISHMENT OF EXPOSURE-RELATED CARE TRANSFORMATION (EXPRT) CENTER** The WRIISC-HOME Exposure-Related Care Transformation (EXPRT) Center is an innovative new center championing VA's mission to be the expert in delivering care for military environmental exposure health outcomes. The EXPRT Center will support health care workers in addressing known barriers to providing care for exposure concerns through education, implementation tools, evaluation, and research. By partnering with Veterans, VA program offices, Department of Defense (DoD), and Academic Affiliates, the EXPRT Center will improve the experience of exposure care for Veterans and increase clinician competence in exposure care. These efforts will help ensure that all Veterans, walking into any VA Medical Center, receive evidence-based, informed, and prompt care for their exposure concerns.
- **STARTUP OF WRIISC-HOME MILITARY EXPOSURES CLINICAL BRIEF SERIES** WRIISC-HOME, in partnership with the Office of Primary Care, presents the Military Exposures Clinical Brief Series, held monthly on Wednesdays at 12:00 noon ET. These 30-minute briefs are designed to support VA staff in implementing PACT Act and toxic exposure screening for all Veterans enrolled in VA, as well as educate Veterans and community providers about these important topics. Upcoming topics include information about the various registry exams and tips for working with Veterans with airborne hazard concerns. Recordings will be available on Train.org, available throughout the VA and non-VA communities.
- **ENHANCING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN WRIISC AND VA PROVIDERS** The WRIISC developed and will maintain a VA SharePoint site (internal access website strictly for VA employees) to aid in providing educational materials about the new VA toxic exposure screening process, WRIISC educational resources for providers including the latest webinars

and fact sheets, and much more! VA providers can use the site as a resource to seek answers to important questions regarding the care of Veterans with toxic exposure concerns and steps in moving forward.

- **CONTINUING ENVIRONMENTAL EXPOSURE EDUCATION CLASS SERIES FOR VETERANS** The WRIISC offers the following class series VIRTUALLY via Webex, an easy-to-access meeting platform via a personal computer, smartphone or tablet. Veterans can register for each class when a class is formally announced about a month before it takes place. All these classes are designed to provide Veterans with information on what is currently known about exposures and health concerns in general. The classes also offer an opportunity to answer common questions. For each class, our experts share available resources and offer tips on how to help Veterans manage their symptoms and improve their quality of life. Please note the classes are for educational purposes only and not intended to serve as medical advice.

### ATTENTION VETERANS: SAVE THE DATES

- **MAY 18, 2023** "GULF WAR EXPOSURES & HEALTH CONCERNS: A CLASS FOR VETERANS"
- **SEPTEMBER 21, 2023** "AGENT ORANGE: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW"

Note: The "AIRBORNE HAZARDS AND BURN PITS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW," class took place in February 2023. Stay tuned to our website for an upcoming date.

This series of classes is a great way to provide Veteran patients with exposure-related concerns the prime opportunity to learn directly from our WRIISC Occupational and Environmental Exposure experts!

## Airborne Hazard and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHPCE) Develops Better Methods of Care for Deployment Related Respiratory Concerns

Part of the mission of WRIISC and the Airborne Hazard and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHPCE) is to conduct and utilize research to develop and disseminate optimal methods to improve clinical care for Veterans who have health issues related to deployment.

Dr. Anays Sotolongo, Co-Director of the AHPCE, along with a number of other clinicians and experts within VA and academia completed a consensus project, which was published in the peer-reviewed journal CHEST. The project also resulted in a developing a toolkit that provides a guideline for clinicians on how to workup Veterans who have airborne hazards exposures and deployment-related shortness of breath. This toolkit enables providers to better respond to Veteran questions and concerns regarding the possible relationship of airborne hazard exposures to their health. Way to go, Dr. Sotolongo and the AHPCE team!

Read this blog to find out about the outstanding role of Airborne Hazard and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHPCE) in the Veteran's successful evaluation and treatment.  
<https://news.va.gov/110941/evaluation-treatment-toxic-exposure/>



“These activities, directly related to the PACT Act, add to our existing programs addressing environmental exposures. These include a WRIISC military exposure certification program, WRIISC exposure specialty centers, and training to providers through our WRIISC-HOME webinar series... and much more. WRIISC will proudly remain on the front-line of improving health care for Veterans with environmental exposure concerns and associated health effects.”

Dr. Helena Chandler  
NJ WRIISC Director

## Complex Exposure Threats Center (CETC) Hosts Advisory on Complex Emerging Threats

**THE EVOLVING NATURE** of warfare and conflict in the 21st Century requires a proactive approach by the VA to address the complex emerging threats to military personnel health and will position the VA to deliver high quality care in a timely manner. Inherently, novel technologies coupled with multiple environmental exposures may present new, unexplained, and complex health conditions with unknown health impacts.

The Complex Exposure Threats Center (CETC) initiative lead by DC WRIISC aims to build on existing research capabilities and create a network of collaborators involving Department of Defense (DoD) personnel, Veterans, and VA clinicians and researchers dedicated to understanding these emerging threats.

On January 26, 2023, the CETC panel hosted a group of Veterans and service members from the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) community to improve ways to assess these threats. EOD service members encounter many exposures and provide an ideal cohort to advise the CETC. The panel discussed presentations from the current team of researchers and clinicians related to the overall plans and pilot initiatives that are underway. Topics included the clinical alignment between the Defense Health Agency and VA, exposure evaluations during EOD training, and assessment strategies for complex exposures.

This panel advised the CETC team and aligned CETC mission priorities to meet the needs of this high-exposure population.



## Research Matters

**WRIISC involvement in research that relates to Veterans' health is continuous. Below is a study recently submitted for publication by the CA WRIISC.**

### **PUBLICATION TITLE:**

Long-term follow-up of a randomized clinical trial of yoga vs cognitive behavioral therapy for chronic pain in Gulf War Illness

### **QUESTION:**

We previously showed in a clinical trial that yoga was effective in reducing pain in Veterans with Gulf War illness (GWI). Compared to a more established treatment (cognitive behavioral therapy; CBT), participants assigned to the yoga treatment experienced a greater decrease in pain, and fatigue by the end of treatment.

**FINDINGS:** For Veterans with pain and fatigue::

- Results showed that both CBT and yoga treatments had long-lasting benefits in reducing pain and fatigue for up to six months.
- Compared to CBT, yoga was associated with greater reductions in pain severity and fatigue during the 6-month follow-up period.

**MEANING:** Both CBT and yoga are effective for treating GWI-related pain and fatigue, and the effects last for at least 6 months. These new results suggest that yoga may provide greater long-term relief than CBT for GWI-related chronic pain and fatigue. Further studies will show if the effects of treatment are dependent on their continued regular use by the Veteran.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:** Researchers include Dr. Peter J. Bayley, CA WRIISC Research Director, and his team.



## HIGHLIGHTING WRIISC'S COLLABORATING PARTNERS

**Partnering with individuals and teams across VA, Department of Defense (DoD) and other federal agencies, as well as universities and research foundations is critical to advancement in the field of Veterans health.**

Dr. Danielle Mathersul is a clinical psychology scientist practitioner with expertise in evaluating non-drug interventions for mental health. She is a Lecturer (this is the equivalent to Assistant Professor in the United States) at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia and holds an affiliate Clinical Research Scientist position at CA WRIISC. She began her WRIISC collaboration as a postdoctoral fellow working with Dr. Peter Bayley and his team at CA WRIISC evaluating yoga compared to psychological therapy for Veterans with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or chronic pain. She has begun to expand this work to Australian Veterans and Defense personnel.

Dr. Mathersul's long-term goal is to establish yoga as an evidence-based intervention for Veteran mental health and resilience. In this way, she hopes to provide Veterans with more treatment options, beyond existing evidence-based psychological therapies that may be associated with stigma or incur long wait times to access care.

In an ongoing collaboration with Dr. Bayley and CA WRIISC researchers, Dr. Mathersul is now exploring whether biomarkers such as heart rate variability can be used to better understand which mental health interventions work best for which Veterans and why (or why not). Ultimately, the goal is to individualize treatment, where a Veteran's physiological functioning might be used to identify which mental health intervention would be most effective for them before they try other interventions that may be less likely to work for them. This will ensure Veterans receive the best care in the shortest timeframe.

**We express our appreciation to you Dr. Mathersul, and all your work directed towards enhancing the mental health of our Veterans remains crucial.**



## IMPROVING POST-COVID-19 CARE For Veterans

**DID YOU KNOW** that an estimated 10-50% of patients develop persistent, disabling, and poorly understood symptoms after COVID-19 infection?

Past WRIISC research looked specifically at the health effects Veterans might experience after having COVID-19 and noted similarities between long COVID and chronic multi-symptom illness (CMI) (e.g., Gulf War Illness). Experiences with care received for both conditions are also very similar. For example, reports of clinicians dismissing patients with symptoms related to either condition as having a "mental health" disorder and low satisfaction with the care received is common.

Dr. Lisa McAndrew's research team has found that a 3-factor approach to care, which they termed concordant care, promotes positive experiences of care for poorly

understood conditions. Despite strong evidence supporting this care approach, there are no interventions at VA to train clinicians on practices to provide care for Veterans with poorly understood conditions. Dr. McAndrew's team developed a training on Concordant Care and in their most recently funded research study, will improve this training and test it among VA clinicians. The main goal of this study is to see if the training would improve VA clinicians' engagement in recommended practices to provide concordant care (i.e., validate, shared understanding, action plan) for Veterans with long COVID.

Importantly, Dr. McAndrew's team will also look at the impact of concordant care on Veterans' satisfaction, adherence to care, and disability. The hope is to use findings of this research to create a better system of care with better outcomes within the VA by providing concordant care.



### DC WRIISC

#### Welcome Dr. Robert D. Forsten

**DC WRIISC TAKES** great pleasure in introducing Dr. Robert D. Forsten, Colonel, US Army, Retired, to the team. Dr. Forsten retired in September 2020 after serving 26 years on active-duty, and started working for the Providence VA Medical Center in October 2020. He transferred to the DC WRIISC in November 2022 to work as a Senior Clinician and Psychiatry Consultant.

Dr. Forsten brings a wealth of tactical, operational, and strategic understanding that will improve our Veteran's care assessments and recommendations in addition to ongoing and future research studies. Dr. Forsten has over 25 peer reviewed articles and specializes in the care and research of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI), substance use disorders, and adult attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He is an appointed Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Bethesda, Maryland, and a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology.



Dr. Forsten's notable past military assignments include deployments to Iraq during OIF1 as well as Afghanistan. He was the US Army Special Operations Command Psychiatrist from 2007-2012 and commanded the 121st Combat Support Hospital in Korea from 2012-2014 and the 62nd Medical Brigade at Joint Base Lewis-McChord from 2016-2018. He also deployed as Task Force-Medical Commander to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands in response to Hurricane Maria from October to December 2017. He is a resident graduate of the U.S. Army War College with a Master of Strategic Studies. Dr. Forsten's recognition for service included the Legion of Merit (4 awards), Combat Action Badge, the Army Surgeon General "A" Designation, the Order of Military Medical Merit, and he is a Distinguished Member of the U.S. Army Medical Department Regiment. For more information: <https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/about-us/who-we-are/dc-wriisc.asp#forsten>

Thankful to have you on the WRIISC team and look forward to working with you in the days ahead Dr. Forsten!

### NJ WRIISC

#### Participation in VA NJHCS PACT Act Enrollment Event

##### WHEN THE PACT

Act passed last year, it was a brand-new piece of legislation, and Veterans with toxic exposures had many questions about what it was and what it meant for them and their families. The VA's plan to address these questions was to host a series of events for Vietnam, Gulf War and post-911 Veterans that took place in VA facilities around the country. The event featured hourly presentations with information about the PACT Act and eligibility/enrollment, toxic exposure screenings and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) claims clinic. On December 13, 2022, NJ WRIISC had the honor of participating in a PACT Act Awareness and Enrollment event at the VA in East Orange, New Jersey. 188 Veterans and family members received a toxic exposure screening in the four hours this event was held. NJ WRIISC providers were involved in the toxic exposure screening process at the event. NJ WRIISC staff also had a table that included fact sheets on various exposures, Veteran exposure education class information, research information (including how to volunteer for studies), and clinical brochures.



NJ WRIISC NURSE PRACTITIONER LYDIA DELUCA DURING A TOXIC EXPOSURE SCREENING AT EAST ORANGE VA

**NJ WRIISC was honored to be part of this event and to directly assist Veterans with the next steps resulting from the PACT Act!**

**WHAT IS VA'S TOXIC EXPOSURE SCREENING?**  
It is a brief screening with questions about Veterans' environmental exposure to toxic substances. The purpose of this is to better care for Veterans moving forward and connect Veterans with resources and benefits they're eligible for. This screening began in November 2022 for all Veterans who go to the VA and is a direct result of the PACT Act.

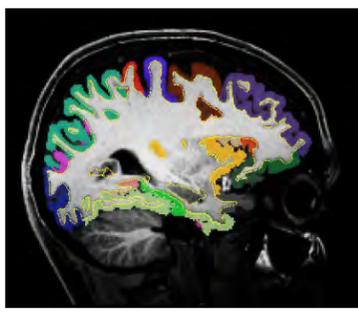
### CA WRIISC

#### Sex Differences-Brain Injury

**MANY VETERANS EVALUATED** at the WRIISC are impacted by symptoms resulting from a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) that occurred during military deployment. Research in this area is crucial in developing better evaluation and treatment strategies for these patients seeking care within the VA.

There are many biological factors which might affect TBI outcomes.

A recent CA WRIISC study investigated sex differences due to TBI using brain cortical thickness and diffusion properties. The focus was on biological sex, as opposed to gender (i.e., socially constructed roles and behavior). Participants consisted of 32 patients with TBI and 21 neurologically healthy controls. All were scanned by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Differences in cortical thickness and diffusion properties were examined between groups (i.e., TBI/control, male/female).



It was found that patients with TBI had more cortical thinning in the brain (both hemispheres) compared to controls. They also showed decreased fractional anisotropy (FA) (a measure of brain connections) for several major white matter tracts in the brain. Healthy females had significantly greater cortical thickness in the brain compared to healthy males. However, this difference was smaller among the patients with TBI. We found no sex differences in diffusion properties.

These findings contribute to a growing body of knowledge on sexual differences in TBI. Shedding light on clinical profiles and optimal rehabilitation strategies for Veterans with TBI remains an important research goal at the CA WRIISC.

Stay tuned for updates about traumatic brain injury (TBI) research by the CA WRIISC team!

Produced by the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center

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U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
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# MILITARY EXPOSURES CLINICAL BRIEFS SERIES FOR PROVIDERS/STAFF

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

Office of Patient Care Services  
Health Outcomes Military Exposures  
War Related Illness and Injury Study Center

2023 WRIISC-HOME Briefs Series  
First Wednesday of each month  
12pm – 12:30pm EST

## Military Exposures Clinical Briefs Series

*Thirty (30)-minute knowledge-based, interview-style briefs that converse with specific occupational groups to offer providers quick, hands-on skills to complement the more detailed learning found in our War Related Injury and Illness Study Center (WRIISC)-HOME Webinar Series.*

March 1, 2023: Registry Exams

April 5, 2023: Tips for Working with Veterans with Airborne Hazards Concerns

May 3, 2023: Military Exposures and Women's Health

June 7, 2023: How the WRIISC Can Support Your Work with Veterans with Exposure Concerns: Resources and Tips for Providers

July 12, 2023: Addressing Exposure-Related Neurocognitive Concerns with Problem Solving Therapy

August 2, 2023: How to Address Veterans Concerns about PFAS



Miss a session?

Watch a previous Military Exposure Clinical Brief [here!](#)

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