

Army Faces Surge of Soldiers Hitting the Bottle

(Feb. 22) — As if recent statistics on mental health in the military weren't bad enough, a new Army report finds that alcoholism among soldiers is a worsening problem requiring the attention of more counselors.

The good news, if any, is that the soldiers are at least turning out for treatment in record numbers.

According to the new report, 9,200 soldiers pursued treatment for alcohol problems last year, a 56 percent increase since the war in Iraq began in 2003. Another 11,892 were sent to a mandatory alcohol-counseling program, designed for those involved in "alcohol-related incidents."

Alcohol is the culprit in 85 percent of outpatient substance-abuse treatment that is sought by soldiers, the Army report states.

Drinking among troops has long been a "rite of passage" in military circles, but this surge in those seeking medical intervention suggests the activity has become symptomatic of larger problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicides, divorce and even depression among military spouses. All of those problems started becoming more common in 2001 and continue to be prevalent among active-duty soldiers,

veterans and their families.

A major study of 250,000 military wives, published last month in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, concluded that the women had a 24 percent higher rate of depression when their partners were deployed for 11 months or longer, compared with nonmilitary wives.

"Mental health effects of current operations are extending beyond soldiers and into their immediate families," the study's authors wrote.

Indeed, entire families are being tragically affected by more than just alcohol abuse. Suicides among veterans reached an all-time high of 160 in 2009, and the first month of 2010 had a total of 12 suspected suicides, according to *Army Times*.

PTSD is another ongoing health crisis that could be connected to increased rates of alcohol abuse. Estimates suggest that anywhere from 20 to 50 percent of returning troops are suffering from symptoms, which include depression, flashbacks and anxiety attacks. But of those who sought help — many don't, because of concerns over stigmatization — only 10 percent completed their recommended treatment, according to a study in the February issue of the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*.

Alcohol abuse and PTSD are not necessarily cause and effect, but those suffering from one are more likely to suffer from the other. After the Vietnam War, between 60 and 80 percent of veterans diagnosed with PTSD were also alcoholics, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The grim statistics make clear the mounting problem facing the the military, but the solutions aren't so obvious. The Army has announced plans to increase the number of on-staff counselors, but the proposal will provide only one counselor for every 1,600 soldiers.

In 2008, the Department of Defense announced an additional \$300 million for mental health research to identify those vulnerable to PTSD and design more effective counseling. Those efforts, if successful, would likely reduce the other health problems — alcoholism included — that continue to plague military families.

But some are suggesting that the war itself — specifically, the duration of deployment — is the problem. In 2008, Army psychiatrist Col. Charles Hoge told Congress that “nearly 30 percent of troops on their third deployment are mental wrecks.”

His statement was part of a larger Pentagon research project, which warned that ongoing redeployments were a mental health disaster waiting to happen. Two years later, the military has a fight on

its hands to keep that warning from becoming a reality.

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