USVH Disease of the Week #1: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

**Epidemiological Facts about PTSD**
A National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet
What causes Posttraumatic Stress Disorder? How common is it? Who gets it?

These questions are asked by epidemiologists, and two major epidemiological studies have produced some answers. The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Survey (NVVRS), conducted between November 1986 and February 1988, comprised interviews of 3,016 American veterans selected to provide a representative sample of those who served in the armed forces during the Vietnam era. The National Comorbidity Survey (NCS), conducted between September 1990 and February 1992, comprised interviews of a representative national sample of 8,098 Americans aged 15 to 54 years.

The National Comorbidity Survey Report provided the following information about PTSD in the general adult population:

The estimated lifetime prevalence of PTSD among adult Americans is 7.8%, with women (10.4%) twice as likely as men (5%) to have PTSD at some point in their lives. This represents a small portion of those who have experienced at least one traumatic event; 60.7% of men and 51.2% of women reported at least one traumatic event. The most frequently experienced traumas were:

* Witnessing someone being badly injured or killed
* Being involved in a fire, flood, or natural disaster
* Being involved in a life-threatening accident
* Combat exposure

The majority of the people in the NCS experienced two or more types of trauma. More than 10% of men and 6% of women reported four or more types of trauma during their lifetimes.

The traumatic events most often associated with PTSD in men were rape, combat exposure, childhood neglect, and childhood physical abuse. For women, the most common events were rape, sexual molestation, physical attack, being threatened with a weapon, and childhood physical abuse.

However, none of these events invariably produced PTSD in those exposed to it, and a particular type of traumatic event did not necessarily affect different sectors of the population in the same way.

The NCS report concluded that "PTSD is a highly prevalent lifetime disorder that often persists for years. The qualifying events for PTSD are also common, with many respondents reporting the occurrence of quite a few such events during their lifetimes."

The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Survey (NVVRS) report provided the following information about PTSD among Vietnam War veterans:
The estimated lifetime prevalence of PTSD among American Vietnam theater veterans is 30.9% for men and 26.9% for women. An additional 22.5% of men and 21.2% of women have had partial PTSD at some point in their lives. Thus, more than half of all male Vietnam veterans and almost half of all female Vietnam veterans -about 1,700,000 Vietnam veterans in all- have experienced "clinically serious stress reaction symptoms."

15.2% of all male Vietnam theater veterans (479,000 out of 3,140,000 men who served in Vietnam) and 8.1% of all female Vietnam theater veterans (610 out of 7,200 women who served in Vietnam) are currently diagnosed with PTSD ("Currently" means 1986-88 when the survey was conducted).

The NVVRS report also contains these figures on other problems of Vietnam veterans:

Forty percent of Vietnam theater veteran men have been divorced at least once (10% had two or more divorces), 14.1% report high levels of marital problems, and 23.1% have high levels of parenting problems.

Almost half of all male Vietnam theater veterans currently suffering from PTSD had been arrested or in jail at least once -34.2% more than once- and 11.5% had been convicted of a felony.

The estimated lifetime prevalence of alcohol abuse or dependence among male theater veterans is 39.2%, and the estimate for current alcohol abuse or dependence is 11.2%. The estimated lifetime prevalence of drug abuse or dependence among male theater veterans is 5.7%, and the estimate for current drug abuse or dependence is 1.8%.

Because the NVVRS sample size underrepresented members of certain ethnic minorities, the Matsunaga Vietnam Veterans Project undertook further epidemiological research among Native American, Asian American, and Pacific Islander veterans. These findings are summarized in two separate National Center for PTSD fact sheets below.

References:


Ronald C. Kessler et al., Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in the National Comorbidity Survey Archives of General Psychiatry, 52(12), 1048-1060 (December 1995)