



National Center for PTSD Celebrating 20 Years, 8/2009

Public Law 98-528 stipulates that “the National Center for PTSD was established to address the needs of Veterans with PTSD by promoting research, education, and training on the “causes and diagnosis of PTSD and the treatment of Veterans for PTSD.” It also was mandated to “serve as a resource center for, and promote and seek to coordinate the exchange of, information regarding all research and training activities carried out by the Veterans Administration and by other Federal and non-Federal entities, with respect to PTSD.”

The National Center for PTSD was established as a multisite consortium in August 1989 following a national competition. The Center has been serving Veterans and the public for 20 years. Its mission is to advance the clinical care and social welfare of America’s Veterans through research, education, and training in the science, diagnosis, and treatment of PTSD and stress-related disorders. The Center has emerged as the world’s leading research and educational center of excellence on PTSD. Its vision is to be the foremost leader in information on PTSD and trauma: information generated internally through its extensive research program, and information synthesized from published scientific research and collective clinical experience that is efficiently disseminated to the field.

The Center is organized to facilitate rapid translation of science into practice, assuring that the latest research findings inform clinical care; and translation of practice into science, assuring that questions raised by clinical challenges are addressed using rigorous experimental protocols. Since its inception, the Center has leveraged its core funding to achieve its mission by obtaining additional grants and contracts. In FY 2008, Center investigators brought in an additional \$21.6 million to support research and educational projects on PTSD.

Center Accomplishments

Even though the Center’s mandate does not call for it to provide direct clinical care, its research, educational, and consultation initiatives have had a positive influence on the health and well-being of PTSD sufferers from both Veteran and non-Veteran sectors.

Discovering new diagnostic tests/procedures: The Center has developed a number of important questionnaires and interviews for screening, assessment, diagnosis, and program evaluation. For example:

- The Clinician Administered PTSD scale (CAPS), which has become the gold standard for PTSD assessment and now has an accompanying online training program.
- The PC-PTSD, a screen used by VA nation-wide to screen patients in primary care. The PC-PTSD also is included in DoD’s Post-Deployment Health Assessment and Reassessment program for Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.
- The PTSD Checklist (PCL), which has become one of the most widely-used questionnaires to assess PTSD in Veteran, military, and civilian settings.

Developing and disseminating new treatments: The Center has conducted some of the most influential studies on PTSD treatment, including 3 VA Cooperative studies: CSP #420, the largest study of psychotherapy for PTSD ever conducted, which evaluated group therapy for male Vietnam Veterans; CSP #494, the only study of PTSD treatment for female Veterans and Active-Duty personnel; and CSP #504, a new study to evaluate strategies for treating patients who fail to respond to conventional medication therapy. Initiated by VA Office of Mental Health

Services, the Center is leading national rollouts of two evidence-based treatment for PTSD throughout VA: Cognitive Processing Therapy and Exposure Therapy.

Influencing practice: The Center's activities are focused on changing practice to improve Veteran care. Perhaps the most influential work in this area was a report in the early 1990s from our Evaluation Division showing that shorter term, brief PTSD programs were as effective and less costly than long term inpatient PTSD programs, resulting in a change in VA policy. The development of a *Best Practice Manual for PTSD Compensation and Pension Evaluations* is a good example of how the Center takes its research expertise and develops hands-on products for clinicians to influence their practice. Traumatic brain injury, a common problem among returning Veterans, often co-occurs with PTSD. To help inform those who treat these Veterans, the Center recently helped coordinate a consensus conference on this important topic.

Another important example is the PTSD Mentoring Program, which is providing education, training, and support to all specialized PTSD program administrators and PTSD specialists across the VA system. The PTSD Mentoring Program is one example of several communities of practice that are being established by the Center, to bring together clinicians that share common goals. This highly successful program is helping these leaders enhance PTSD treatment available to Veterans throughout the VA system.

Discovering new basic facts: The Center has played a significant role in advancing the understanding of PTSD and contributing to the treatment of those who suffer from it. The Center's work has contributed to the viewpoint that PTSD is a psychobiological disorder affecting not just emotions and behavior, but one that also affects the structure, chemistry, and functioning of the brain. Center firsts in biological research include: describing a specific disturbance in the regulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis stress system in PTSD; applying PET/SPECT imaging to identify a receptor defect associated with PTSD; and identifying a potential mechanism for treating stress-related reduction of hippocampal volume.

The Center has helped to promote a better understanding about how traumatic stress affects health and well being in military and civilian populations. For example, Center investigators have lead the field in identifying the unique issues associated with trauma in female Veterans; studying the effects of peacekeeping; applying advanced statistical techniques to understand the etiology of PTSD; and identifying the effects of PTSD on physical health. The Center also conducted a large epidemiological study of PTSD in Native American and Asian American Vietnam Veterans and a large-scale study of sexual harassment in Reserve forces.

Educating Providers: Over the past 20 years, provider education has shifted from face-to-face trainings and written materials to more interactive, electronic training. However, the Center has increasingly shifted its approach to utilizing new technologies to enhance the scope and effectiveness of its activities. The Center was an early proponent of the Internet and first brought its award-winning website, www.ptsd.va.gov, online in 1995. More than 1,000,000 unique users from the US and other countries around the world now visit the site annually. The website contains facts sheets, manuals and videos for clinicians. Today, in addition to our on-site Clinical Training program, clinicians can access online training through "PTSD 101," a web-based curriculum containing 22 courses related to war zone stress and PTSD. Other web-based resources for providers include:

- The *Iraq War Clinician Guide*, developed by the Center along with staff from Walter Reed Army Medical Center to help VA and DoD clinicians serve personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.
- An award-winning series of videos that addresses the needs of Native American, Asian American-Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and African American Veterans with PTSD.

- *Psychological First Aid*, a 186-page disaster field operations guide.

The Center also reaches providers through its newsletters. The *Clinician's Trauma Update - Online (CTU-Online)* is an electronic newsletter that provides summaries of articles from a variety of journals that are relevant to clinicians, with special emphasis articles dealing with treatment and assessment. The *PTSD Research Quarterly* provides expert reviews of the scientific literature on a specific topic and is intended primarily for researchers and scientists.

Educating Veterans, family members, and the general public: The website serves as a platform to provide information to Veterans with PTSD and anyone who wants to learn more about the disorder. The website was recently updated and has a section especially for Veterans and the general public. It includes numerous fact sheets, videos, and links to other web resources. The two most recent products are a guide for service members returning from deployment, *Returning from the War Zone: A Guide for Military Personnel*, and a companion guide to help family members with reintegration, *Returning from the War Zone: A Guide for Families*. The Family Guide is also available in an interactive online format with video footage of families dealing with PTSD.

Organizational Structure

The Center was designed as a consortium of VA centers of excellence in PTSD in recognition of the breadth of the Congressional mandate. The ability of this structure to capitalize on each site's expertise and resources was crucial to the success of the current Center's proposal in the 1989 VA-wide competition. The consortium has subsequently proven to be a cost-effective model that facilitates multidisciplinary and multi-site collaboration among the 7 divisions.

The Executive Division at the White River Junction VAMC directs the Center's operation. The Division hosts the Center's website and houses the largest collection of PTSD materials in the world. It also is home to a bibliographic database of over 37,000 references on trauma and PTSD: PILOTS, the Published International Literature on Traumatic Stress. Each of the other divisions provides a core of expertise in various areas. The Behavioral Science Division, located at the VA Boston Healthcare System, focuses on assessment, post-deployment psychology, stress-related psychophysiology, and epidemiology. Also located in Boston, the Women's Health Sciences Division focuses on issues related to psychological and physical health in female Veterans, interpersonal violence, and cognitive-behavioral treatment. The VA Connecticut Healthcare System houses two other divisions: Clinical Neurosciences, which focuses on pharmacotherapy, neurobiology, brain imaging, genetics, and resilience; and Evaluation, which focuses on PTSD clinical program evaluation (through a programmatic link with the Northeast Program Evaluation Center). The Dissemination and Training Division at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System focuses on education, knowledge dissemination, and health services research, and offers an in-person Clinical Training Program for trauma professionals. The Pacific Islands Division at VA Pacific Islands Health Care System focuses on ethnocultural issues, Active Duty personnel, and telehealth.

By drawing on the specific expertise vested at each separate division, the National Center provides a unique infrastructure within which to implement multidisciplinary initiatives regarding the etiology, pathophysiology, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of PTSD. Together with support from VA and other constituents, the Center continues to *advance science and promote understanding of traumatic stress*.