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NHRC Researchers Publish Paper in JAMA on the Risk Factors for Suicides in the U.S. Military

SILVER SPRING, Md. – Navy Medicine researchers from the Naval Health Research Center (NHRC) in San Diego, published a paper on the risk factors for suicides in the U.S. military in the August 7, 2013, issue of Journal of the American Medical Association. Working with collaborators from the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences, Bethesda, Md. and the Walter Reed Army Research Institute, Silver Spring, Md., the researchers reported findings that do not support the assumption that specific deployment related factors such as length of deployment, number of deployments, or combat experiences, are directly associated with increased suicide risk.

This study showed that the strongest risk factors for suicides include male gender and underlying mental disorders including depression, bipolar disorder, and alcohol misuse. These findings are similar to other studies involving civilian populations.

The NHRC researchers designed a study focused on the risk factors associated with suicide in current and former U.S. military members. The study considered demographic, military, mental health, behavioral and deployment data. The study participants were current and former U.S. military personnel from all the military branches including active duty and Reserve/National Guard, who are enrolled in the Millennium Cohort Study. The Millennium Cohort Study, conducted by NHRC, began in 2001 and is the largest prospective study in U.S. military with over 200,000 participants.

Previous military studies have relied on case reports and cross-sectional studies, and have not linked data during service with post-service periods. This study addressed these gaps by using data from the Millennium Cohort Study which follows a large cohort of service members from all branches of the military during and after service time.



This was the first time data from a large military population involving all services was linked with national death records allowing researchers to measure the relationship of risk factors during service with the long-term outcomes of suicide, even if the suicides occurred after leaving military service.

The findings from this study suggest that prevention initiatives in the DoD and VA that address previous mental health disorders, and involve screening and facilitation of high quality treatment for mental and substance use disorders in primary care, specialty mental health care, and post-deployment settings have the greatest potential to mitigate suicide risk.