

Graphic Novel Helps Corpsmen Cope with Combat-related Stress

10/13/2010 By Valerie Kremer, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Public Affairs

WASHINGTON (NNS) -- The Naval Health Research Center (NHRC) recently produced a 200-page graphic novel called "The Docs" as a communication tool to help Navy Corpsmen with the stresses of combat deployments.

The graphic novel tells the stories of four fictional corpsmen serving in Iraq at the height of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"Since the start of combat operations in the Middle East, Navy Medicine recognized that expeditionary hospital corpsmen have extremely high exposure to the many significant stressors of war, both acute and chronic," said Capt. Greg Utz, NHRC commanding officer. "Their dual roles as caregivers and combatants puts them at high risk for stress injuries, so we developed this graphic novel as an innovative way to help our Sailors prepare for and interpret situations they may see in theater."

"The Docs" portrays four expeditionary Corpsmen from both active duty and Reserve components, who are deployed with Marine Corps and seabee units.

The story follows them as they grapple with having to kill enemy forces; struggle to save the lives of wounded Sailors and Marines; encounter home front problems such as injuries to their children, and other concerns that test their resilience.

In addition, they battle the stigma of seeking mental health care for their patients and for themselves, and gain greater awareness of their need to care for one another.

"The goal for this story is to provide an entertaining and community-appropriate message of the importance of caring for caregiver, and the responsibility shared in that endeavor," said Utz.

As an integral part of Navy Medicine's Care for the Caregiver program, "The Docs" was developed with the intent to instill realistic expectations of possible deployment stressors, and to provide examples for corpsmen on helpful techniques for in-theater care of stress injuries.

Graphic novels tell stories through use of sequential art in a traditional comic format, but have a beginning, middle, and end, as with traditional text novels. This format was chosen specifically for its appeal to the targeted age group and its value in providing thought-provoking content for discussion in training scenarios.

Jerry Larson, Ph.D., NHRC chief scientist for behavioral health, said the format works in helping provide corpsmen with tools they will need in high stress situations. Initial feedback from the Hospital Corps has been positive.

"Addressing the psychological toll of combat and creating the expectation of recovery is one of the most critical things we can achieve in Navy Medicine," said Larson. "While sometimes recovery requires assistance from mental health providers, nevertheless the expectation of recovery must be instilled."

Larson said copies of the "The Docs" will be distributed to corpsmen preparing to deploy. The primary audience for distribution is the Naval Expeditionary Medical Training Institute, and field medical training battalions -- both of which are located on Marine Corps bases.

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Navy and Marine Corps personnel can order a free copy by visiting the Marine Corps Combat and Operational Stress Control site: http://bhin.usmc-mccs.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=c_user.dsp_browse&cat_id=1.

The graphic novel is available for online viewing and download at: <http://www.med.navy.mil/Navy%20Medicine%20Media%20Room/Pages/Publications.aspx> and plans are underway to animate the story for viewing on portable phones and computers.

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