

## **Veterans Health: Why More Outreach Is Needed**

*By John Rowan*

Serving in the military poses potential long-term--as well as immediate--risks to the health of a soldier, sailor, marine, airmen and -women. The immediate health issues--bullet or shrapnel wounds, traumatic amputations, obvious injury to the brain--are treated properly, for the most part, first by military medical personnel, then by clinicians at healthcare facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs, the VA. Some of the long-term health conditions--Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) that may manifest years later, as well as a host of health conditions that are presumed by the VA to have derived from one's military service--are often not connected by the veterans to their time in uniform--and often not until it's too late.

Because there is very little outreach to the men and women who served our nation honorably and well, and because too many veterans succumb to diseases that can be traced back to their time in service, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) has created, in partnership with dozens of interested healthcare and advocacy organizations, the Veterans Health Council (VHC).

The mission of the Council is to improve the health of veterans by creating an ongoing forum via its website, [www.veteranshealth.org](http://www.veteranshealth.org), for veterans and their families, as well as for clinicians. The Council was formally introduced and its web site launched at a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on February 25, 2009.

The goals of the Council are fourfold. We want to inform veterans and their families about health issues related to their military service as well as the health care and other benefits available to them. We want to educate healthcare communities about the multiple health issues associated with military service. With advocacy organizations, we want to develop educational materials for medical colleges, nursing schools, teaching hospitals, and related entities, as well as to "target" veterans in the booklets and brochures published by these organizations along with other means of electronic dissemination. And we want to advocate on behalf of healthcare initiatives for veterans and their families.



This effort is necessary because up to 80 percent of veterans do not use the VA for their healthcare needs. The sad reality is that many veterans are simply unaware they may have health problems related to their military service: diseases, conditions, and maladies, which entitle them both to medical care and compensation from the VA. Also, most private-sector physicians and other clinicians are unaware of the potential connection between health problems and military service.

The VHC web site, which we expect to “grow” exponentially, provides initial information on health conditions associated with military service, along with links to other healthcare sites related to specific diseases associated with three periods of war: Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and the Global War on Terror. We urge veterans and their loved ones to visit [www.veteranshealth.org](http://www.veteranshealth.org) to learn about the illnesses related to a particular period of service. Furthermore, if a veteran dies from a service-connected illness, the spouse may be entitled to Dependency Indemnity Compensation (DIC), as are eligible dependents.

Most importantly, the web site offers general information on how to file a claim for disability compensation. If a veteran has a service-connected medical condition, or if a surviving dependent believes that the veteran died from such an illness, the web site provides a link to a locator service for accredited veterans service representatives who can assist them in filing a claim for VA benefits.

Over the next few years, we hope to improve and expand our outreach efforts, through the web site as well as other means of communication. Because far too many veterans, and healthcare professionals, do not know about the connection between military service and health conditions which may affect veterans years after they’ve returned to the civilian world--and this is knowledge that they really need to have.

*John Rowan is in his second term as National President of Vietnam Veterans of America.*

