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SEARCH



'Shell-shocked' vets studied

Soldiers could be suffering from 'blast induced' brain trauma, not post-traumatic stress

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OTTAWA -- Some soldiers returning from Afghanistan depressed, angry and aggressive could be suffering from physical injuries caused by exposure to gunfire and bomb blasts -- not psychological wounds from combat stress, according to a Montreal-based physiologist.

The Canadian Forces is making a big push to help members cope with mental illness, launching a new campaign this week to raise awareness and foster greater peer support among the troops. But Thomas Fox, a researcher and physiologist with the Centre Hyperbare de L'île, in Pincourt, Que., believes some of the soldiers diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) could benefit from treatment for "blast induced" injuries to the brain.

"It is exactly the same constellation of signs and symptoms -- indistinguishable," he said.

Symptoms of PTSD include depression, anger, irritability, sleeplessness and memory loss. Sufferers can also become violent and suicidal.

Fox said a growing body of research shows tiny bubbles can form in the body due to overpressure when soldiers are exposed to heavy gunfire or the detonation of powerful improvised explosive devices (IEDs.) Those bubbles can eventually make their way to the head and brain.

EFFECTS CUMULATIVE

"You can't discount the adverse reaction to the IED. It's the chief way that they (insurgents) engage a superior force in the field," he said. "It's the number one casualty-making weapon of this war."

Fox, who served with the U.S. army and has made presentations to American government officials and conferences, said effects are cumulative, which means soldiers exposed to a greater number of firefights and improvised explosive device explosions in Iraq or Afghanistan are more likely to experience symptoms. He said hyperbaric oxygen treatment, now being tested as an option to treat traumatic brain injury in pilot projects including the U.S. Air Force, mitigates debilitating effects.

The treatment is similar to that used for a condition called "diver's bends," which occurs when a diver is exposed to increased pressure without taking proper precautions to prevent the formation of bubbles.

Invisible traumatic brain injuries and PTSD have been called the "signature wounds" of the war on terror. Fox said many soldiers get frustrated because they believe there is something physically wrong with them but are told they are battling PTSD and are "in denial."

"True shell-shocked individuals are not psychologically injured," he said.

Fox wants the opportunity to make his case to the Canadian government, and has written to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. In November 2008, the Department of National Defence commissioned a \$150,000 study on brain injuries caused by exposure to bomb blasts. The contract tender notice said the diagnosis "remains controversial" and sought more evidence for understanding the phenomenon of physical effects of bomb blasts.

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