

**STATEMENT OF  
THE AMERICAN LEGION  
TO THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE HEARING ON  
"OVERMEDICATION: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS"**

**APRIL 30, 2014**

*By the time Justin Minyard discovered the video of himself stoned, drooling and unable to help his daughter unwrap her Christmas presents, he was taking enough OxyContin®, oxycodone and Valium every day to deaden the pain of several terminally ill cancer patients.*

*"Heroin addicts call it the nod," the former Special Forces soldier says of his demeanor in that video. "My head went back. My eyes rolled back in my head.*

*I started drooling on myself. My daughter was asking why I wasn't helping her, why I wasn't listening to her."*

*Seeing that video jolted Minyard out of a two-year opiate stupor. He asked a Fort Bragg pain specialist to help him get off the painkillers his primary care physician had prescribed. "I was extremely disappointed in myself," he says. "I knew I couldn't do that to my family again."<sup>1</sup>*

The preceding story is just one of many recent anecdotal accounts of veterans struggling with over-prescription of medications. In the best cases, the veteran in question has been able to pull themselves back from the brink, regroup, and work towards a different mode of care that doesn't have the same devastating effect on the veteran and their families. In the worst cases, veterans have died from accidental overdose, or attempted suicide in a medication induced haze. In September 2013, CBS news reported the tragic tale of 35 year old Army SPC Scott McDonald, who tragically perished from the accidental overdose brought about by the cumulative effects of the lengthy list of medications he had been prescribed<sup>2</sup>. The American Legion believes these risks increase the importance of exploring Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) therapies<sup>3</sup> that can reduce the overreliance on prescription drugs and help bring these veterans back from the brink of the abyss.

The American Legion has continued to be concerned with the unprecedented numbers of veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from TBI and PTSD, categorized as the "*signature wounds*" of these conflicts. The American Legion believed that all possibilities should be explored and considered in an attempt to finding treatments, therapies, and cures for TBI and PTSD to include alternative treatments and therapies, and they need to make them accessible to all veterans. If these alternative treatments and therapies are deemed effective they should be made available and integrated into the veterans' current health care model of care.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt "On the Edge" The American Legion Magazine story by Ken Olsen, April 1, 2014

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/veterans-dying-from-overmedication/>

<sup>3</sup> Resolution #108: Request Congress Provide the Department of Veterans Affairs Adequate Funding for Medical and Prosthetic Research

As a result The American Legion established the TBI and PTSD Committee in 2010 comprised of American Legion Past National Commanders, Commission Chairmen, respected academic figures, and national American Legion staff. The committee is focused on investigating existing science and procedures as well as alternative methods for treating TBI and PTSD that are not being employed by the Department of Defense (DOD) and VA for the purpose of determining if such alternative treatments are practical and efficacious.

During a three year study the committee met with leading authorities in the DOD, VA, academia, veterans, private sector mental health experts, and caregivers about treatments and therapies veterans have received or are currently receiving for their TBI and PTSD symptoms. Last year the committee released their findings and recommendations in a report titled "*The War Within.*" "*The War Within*" report highlights these treatments and therapies and also identifies findings and recommendations to the DOD and VA.

### **Key Highlights and Findings of the Report:**

Some of the critical findings of *The War Within* included:

- Most of the existing research for the last several years has only validated the current treatments that already exist – VA and DOD research is not pushing the boundaries of what can be done with new therapies, merely staying within an environment of self-confirmation bias.
- There seems to be a lack of fast track mechanisms within DOD and VA to employ innovative or novel therapies – a standardized approach to these therapies could help service members and veterans gain access to care that could help them.
- While some VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) *do* offer complementary alternative medicine (CAM) therapies, they are not offered in a consistent or uniform manner across all 152 VAMCs nationwide – VA struggles with consistency and needs better guidance.

In addition to those findings, the TBI and PTSD Committee made some recommendations for the way forward:

- Congress needs to provide oversight and funding to DOD and the VA for innovative TBI and PTSD research that is being used successfully in the private sector healthcare systems such as hyperbaric oxygen therapy, virtual reality exposure therapy, and non-pharmacological treatments and therapies<sup>4</sup>.
- Congress needs to increase DOD and the VA research and treatment budgets in order to improve the research, screening, diagnosis, and treatments for TBI and PTSD.

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<sup>4</sup> Resolution #108: Request Congress Provide the Department of Veterans Affairs Adequate Funding for Medical and Prosthetic Research

- DOD and VA need to accelerate their research efforts in order to effectively and efficiently diagnose and develop evidence-based TBI and PTSD treatments.

### **Continued Efforts:**

The American Legion's efforts to assess the care and treatments available for veterans suffering from TBI and PTSD are not limited to the efforts of the TBI and PTSD Committee. In 2003, The American Legion established the System Worth Saving Task Force to conduct ongoing, on-site evaluations of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) medical system. Annually, System Worth Saving visits provide Legionnaires, Congress and the public with an in-depth, boots on the ground view of how veterans are receiving their healthcare across the country.

Over the last several years, the System Worth Saving reports have examined the full spectrum of VHA care, but specifically have noted several things about how VHA delivers on complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in their facilities.

VA medical centers throughout the VA healthcare system are committed, dedicated, and compassionate about treating veterans with TBI. Many medical centers throughout the country have found successful complementary and alternative methods for the treatment of TBI and PTSD such as hiking, canoeing, nature trips, equine, and music therapy<sup>5</sup>. While some systems like the El Paso VA Healthcare System offer several CAM solutions, such as yoga, guitar lessons, sleep hygiene and other practices, other locations such as the Pittsburgh VA and Roseburg VA Healthcare System are more limited, offering only acupuncture in Pittsburgh, and acupuncture for pain management through the fee basis program in Roseburg<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to the ongoing System Worth Saving Task Force visits, The American Legion is taking the lead for veterans by aggressively pursuing the best possible treatment options for veterans on multiple fronts.

### **Hearing from Veterans About their Treatment:**

On February 3, 2014, The American Legion launched a TBI and PTSD survey online in order to evaluate the efficacy of the veterans' TBI and PTSD care, treatments, and therapies and to find out if they are receiving and benefiting from CAM treatment offered by the DOD and VA. The survey, conducted in coordination with the Data Recognition Corporation (DRC), Dr. Jeff Greenberg, PhD, and the Institute for the Advancement of Military and Veteran Healthcare, was to assist The American Legion to better understand the experiences of veterans who receive care throughout the VA healthcare system.

William Detweiler, Past National Commander and Chairman of the TBI and PTSD Committee stated, "The American Legion is very concerned by the unprecedented number of veterans who

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<sup>5</sup> 2011 SWS – "Transition of Care from DOD to VA"

<sup>6</sup> 2014 SWS – "Past, Present and Future of VA Health Care"

suffer from these two conditions...We firmly believe that both VA and DOD need to act aggressively in adopting all effective treatments and cures, including alternatives being used in the private sector, and make them available to our veterans nationwide...By completing this survey, veterans across America will have the opportunity to tell the true story of the types of care and treatments that they are actually receiving for PTSD and TBI. The survey will greatly help The American Legion in its efforts to advise the Administration, Congress, DOD, VA on the best possible care and treatments for these injuries.”

The full survey results will be released and discussed in detail at the upcoming American Legion TBI and PTSD Symposium, June 2014, however two key data points emerged which bear special significance to this testimony.

- Medication appears to be the front line treatment reported by respondents.
- A sizeable proportion of respondents reported prescriptions of up to 10 medications for PTSD/TBI across their treatment experience.

Both of these data points should raise concerns about whether veterans are getting the right treatment for these signature wounds of the past decade’s wars.

### **Symposium:**

On June 24, 2014 in Washington, D.C., The American Legion is hosting a TBI and PTSD Symposium entitled “*Advancing Care and Treatment for Veterans with TBI and PTSD.*” The symposium aims to discuss the findings and recommendations from the TBI and PTSD veteran’s survey, and will hear directly from service members, veterans, and caregivers on their TBI and PTSD experiences, treatments and care. The symposium will also help us how the Administration, Congress, DOD and VA are integrating complementary and alternative treatments and therapies into current models of veterans’ health care.

### **Conclusion:**

After a decade of war, America is still grappling with an evolving understanding of the nature of the wounds of warfare. Veterans must be reassured that the care they receive, whether serving on active duty in the military, or through the VA Healthcare system in their home town, is the best treatment available in the world. To combat the physical and psychological wounds of war, sometimes the old treatments are not going to be the most efficacious.

Just as new understanding about the nature of these wounds emerges, so too must the new understanding about the best way to treat these wounds continue to adapt and evolve. Veterans are fortunate to have access to a healthcare system designed to treat their wounds, but that system must recognize that different treatments will have differing levels of effectiveness depending on the individual needs of the wounded veteran. There is no silver bullet. There is no single treatment guaranteed to cure all ailments. With a national policy that respects and

encourages alternative therapies and cutting edge medicine, veterans have the best possible shot to get the treatment they need to continue being the productive backbone of society their discipline and training prepares them to be.

Consider the following condensed versions of one of the many veteran stories in The American Legion's; *The War Within*

*Tim Hecker joined the Army at 18 and soon decided to make a career of it. He served 22 years in all, in and out of combat, rising to the rank of master sergeant. In the summer of 1990, he married his high-school sweetheart, Tina, and the couple had three children.*

*Then Tim couldn't remember having married Tina. He couldn't tell his sons apart. Their names escaped him. Injuries suffered in two separate roadside-bomb explosions in a span of two months in Iraq in early 2008 left him with a traumatic brain injury and severe post-traumatic stress. He was no longer the man Tina had married.*

*Frustrated with her husband's descent and the lack of progress with traditional care, Tina went online and found information about hyperbaric medicine. Following a phone call and an initial interview, Tim was selected to be part of a pilot study on the use of hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBOT) for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He claims the treatments have given him back most of his pre-injury life.*

*"By the fourth treatment, I started feeling like a new person," he says at his home in West Edmeston, N.Y. "I was more aware. I could see things. The deeper I got into the treatments, my cognition started to come back – my motor skills and my balance. My vision started to improve. The biggest benefit was my emotional control."*

*"We're talking a 180-degree turn around," Tina says. "There are days when he's almost back to normal with his personality."<sup>7</sup>*

Ultimately, that is why it's so important to ensure VA solves the over medication puzzle. The veterans have already returned home from war. This is about helping the veterans to finally return home to their families.

The American Legion looks forward to working with the Committee, as well as VA, to find solutions that work for America's veterans. For additional information regarding this testimony, please contact Mr. Ian de Planque at The American Legion's Legislative Division, (202) 861-2700 or [ideplanque@legion.org](mailto:ideplanque@legion.org).

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.legion.org/publications/217301/war-within-treatment-traumatic-brain-injury-and-post-traumatic-stress-disorder>