

# WRIISC Advantage

FALL/WINTER 2016

**Learn more about:**

**our CLINICAL SERVICES**

**our RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS**

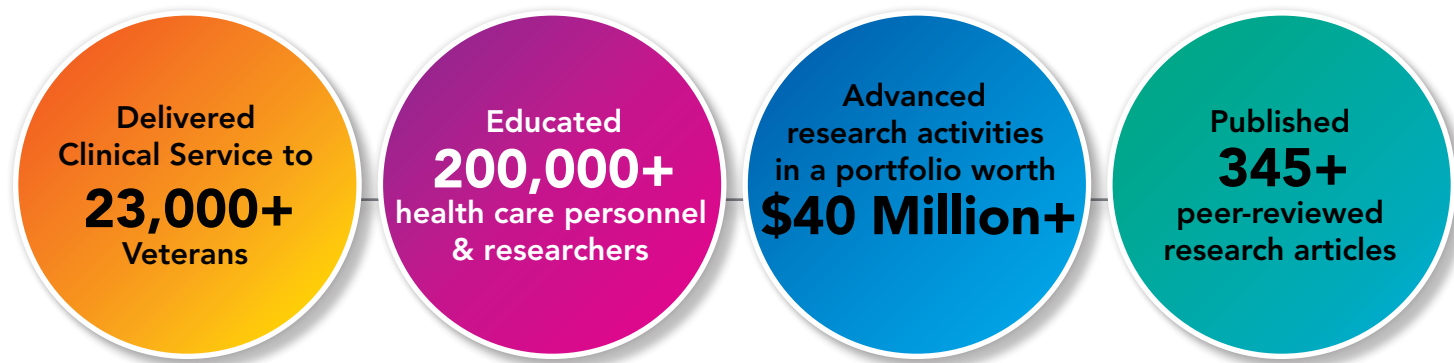
**our EDUCATION efforts for  
VETERANS and PROVIDERS**

celebrating 15 years of  
**SERVING VETERANS** 



# Celebrating 15 YEARS OF SERVING VETERANS

This edition of *WRIISC Advantage* focuses on celebrating our 15 years of serving Veterans. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) is a National Resource dedicated to providing post-deployment health expertise to Veterans and their medical providers through clinical care, research, education, and risk communication. Since our inception in 2001, the WRIISC has:



## History of the WRIISC

**OVER 15 YEARS AGO**, in response to Public Law 105-368, VA contracted with the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to develop a plan for establishing National Centers for the study of war-related illnesses and post-deployment issues. On November 5, 1999, the NAS recommended that VA establish centers for the study of war-related illnesses similar in structure to VA's Geriatric Research, Education, and Clinical Centers. In 2001, after a competitive review process, the first two WRIISC centers were established; one at the Washington, DC VA Medical Center and the other at the East Orange Campus of the VA New Jersey Health Care System. To provide wider coverage and easier access for Veterans, an additional WRIISC was authorized and became operational at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System in Palo Alto, CA in February 2008. The three-part mission at the WRIISC: clinical, research, and education has always worked together to better understand the health issues facing deployed Veterans, provide state-of-the-art care and services to Veterans, and educate providers, Veterans, their caregivers, and family members. Through clinical care, we determine gaps of knowledge in Veterans' care and this helps us



ONE OF THE FIRST WRIISCS WAS ESTABLISHED IN 2001 AT EAST ORANGE, NJ

identify and generate important research questions. Our research focuses on understanding underlying disease mechanisms that can contribute to evidence-based treatments and tools to improve Veteran health and clinical care. Our clinical care and research produce new health information that we share with providers and patients through education. Our educational programs for providers also improve patient outcomes by sharing knowledge about new approaches and best practices. WRIISC post-deployment expertise includes: chronic multisymptom illness (CMI), such as Gulf War Illness (GWI), deployment-related environmental and occupational exposures (various toxins, airborne hazards including smoke from burnpits, medical prophylactic [or preventative] measures, and infectious agents), traumatic brain injury (particularly mild injuries with long-term consequences), and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Since our inception, the WRIISC has developed strong relationships with premiere academic and government institutions throughout the United States. These collaborations continue to help strengthen and support our WRIISC program goals.

## Clinical Program Accomplishments

Our WRIISC staff members focus on evaluating and assisting Veterans with chronic, difficult to diagnose medical, or unexplained symptoms. To best serve Veterans and better equip their providers to provide ongoing care, we updated our referral process so that all Veterans referred to our Center receive a thorough medical review and recommendations for next steps, including possible additional services from the WRIISC. Referred to as an *eConsult*, we conduct the same thorough chart review as we do for Veterans seen in comprehensive evaluations. This results in personalized recommendations for next steps from our team of clinicians.

**"The many providers listened and evaluated my condition(s) to the fullest extent possible. They provided a path to follow. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the help."**

A multidisciplinary or team-based approach has always been our signature for comprehensive evaluation as we work with VA's Patient Aligned Care Teams to improve overall Veteran care. The WRIISC Comprehensive Multidisciplinary Evaluation is for Veterans with chronic medically unexplained health concerns that have been well worked up and are possibly related to deployment. VA providers can refer Veterans through an interfacility consult or IFC. Our WRIISC team coordinates a multisymptom assessment and provides diagnostic and treatment recommendations that cross a wide spectrum of symptoms and body systems. The evaluation applies highly specialized medical expertise, often giving new hope to patients with post-deployment health concerns while allowing for in-depth clinical evaluations that inform best practices to be shared with VA providers.

The WRIISC's team-based approach to clinical evaluation provides an integrated summary of the Veteran's health concerns and diagnoses. We focus on the next steps a Veteran can take to manage their health concerns and make recommendations for their providers as part of the long-term care of the Veteran.

Coordinating assessments across multiple departments and specialties over a 3- to 5-day visit allows our team to address the big picture of health. Each Veteran receives an extensive assessment which typically includes a history and physical, neurological and mental status evaluations, occupational and environmental exposure assessments, a psychological/neuropsychological evaluation, social work assessment, and a health education session including a focus on integrative health modalities.

Other specialty services are consulted as needed to address Veterans' specific medical concerns. Over the course of the evaluation, Veterans receive assessments and consultations that would otherwise require several months to schedule and complete at their home VA facility. Moreover, those appointments would require multiple trips, making specialty referrals difficult.

A WRIISC visit may include an enhanced evaluation for **airborne hazards concerns** consisting of: an environmental exposure assessment, education on health effects and the latest research findings, and specialty testing at the Airborne Hazard Center of Excellence (AHCE) established in 2013 at the NJ WRIISC. The AHCE pioneers the effort to better understand potential health effects of airborne hazards exposure for Veterans. This center also leads VA in addressing concerns of returning Servicemembers by providing the most recent, up-to-date knowledge.

Another service available to deployed Veterans referred by their providers is an Environmental Exposure Assessment to address Veteran concerns about a particular military-related occupational or environmental exposure and its possible health effects. These can be done in person or by phone by a specialist in the field of Environmental Exposure concerns.



We are proud of our record in serving Veterans. Upon completion of the comprehensive evaluation, 97% of the 111 Veterans who completed the satisfaction survey would recommend our program to other Veterans. Veterans also responded with overwhelmingly positive ratings to other survey questions:



Did the WRIISC listen carefully to you (overall)?



Did the WRIISC team explain things in a way that was easy to understand?



Did the WRIISC team seem to know the important information about your medical history?



Did the WRIISC team show respect for what you had to say?



Did the WRIISC team talk with you about specific things you could do to manage your condition(s)?

### Standalone Clinical Services

Throughout the years, we have also offered a variety of services to local Veterans. Current services vary by site but include: Neurology, Mental Health Services, Social Work, Integrative Medicine, Gulf War and Agent Orange Registry examinations, and Health Education.

### Research Highlights

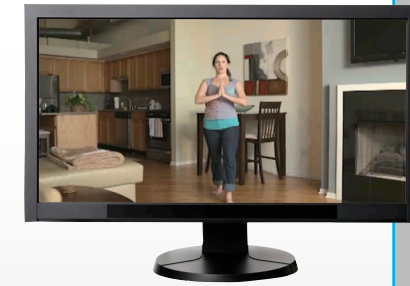
Our unique team of researchers and clinicians always worked side-by-side to use research to improve clinical care. We are dedicated to conducting research to improve war-related health problems. WRIISC research projects cover everything from basic science and epidemiology, to human physiology, to treatment studies, implementation, and health outcomes.

Recent research highlights:

- ▶ We continue to lead the way in research aimed at GWI and CMI— we currently have 10 funded projects targeting issues facing Veterans of Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield (ODS/S) with increased success in recruiting Veterans for these important studies.
- ▶ We have two funded clinical trials addressing pain with novel treatment approaches. One studies yoga and the other investigates non-invasive brain stimulation (repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation [rTMS]).
- ▶ We focus on PTSD in eight of our research grants with studies looking at the impact of co-morbid health conditions such as traumatic brain injury (TBI), sleep disorders, and genetics, and how PTSD affects memory, social cognition, and impulse control. Our treatment studies examine novel interventions such as yoga breathing for PTSD and brain stimulation for depression. Several studies are utilizing the skills of neuropsychologists, neurologists, psychiatrists, and psychologists

Veterans' Top Complaints	Examples of Active WRIISC Research Studies
1. Pain	A Multimodal Evaluation of the Comparative Efficacy of Yoga versus a Patient-Centered Support Group for Treating Chronic Pain in GWI
2. Neurological	Diagnosis of Late-stage, Early-onset, Small-fiber Polyneuropathy
3. Fatigue	Examination of Cognitive Fatigue in GWI Using Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging
4. Mental Health	Breathing Meditation Intervention for PTSD
5. Cognition	Cognitive Rehabilitation for GWI
6. Respiratory	Airborne Hazards Exposure and Cardiorespiratory Health of Veterans
7. Sleep	Integrative Medicine for Sleep, Health Functioning and Quality of Life in Veterans with GWI

NJ WRIISC developed and distributed an educational tool called the **STAR Well-Kit (SWK)**, a set of videos designed to introduce and encourage Integrative Health and Wellness practices. To date, more than 11,000 SWKs have been distributed clinically (with over 20 thousand requested) and the SWK is now available on our WRIISC website, the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation's (OPCC&CT) website, and YouTube. Lessons learned from research on the SWK can be found in two recent research publications. Findings can be applied to dissemination of any new educational tool within a health care setting!



on our WRIISC team to advance the knowledge base in the areas of cognition and cognitive rehabilitation. Assessments of cognitive abilities/improvement are also included in several treatment studies.

- ▶ As TBI is a top concern to post-deployment Veterans, we actively engage in research efforts to develop innovative diagnostic and treatment methods. We work to develop new brain imaging methods to help detect and characterize subtle changes in the brain that may occur with mild TBI and co-morbid psychiatric illnesses. Our research team develops new and improved treatments such as treating vestibular dysfunction with a portable brain stimulator and utilizing rTMS stimulation to improve cognition in Veterans with TBI.
- ▶ As a leader in the area of Integrative Medicine research, we have two funded grants to study complementary and alternative treatments for Veterans of ODS/S. Notably, the positive results from recent research in Integrative Health and Wellness were a driving factor in the successful opening of the Integrative Health and Wellness program at the DC VAMC.

Our investigators are leaders in their areas of expertise presenting at national and international conferences. They have also served on grant review panels for the VA, Department of Defense (DoD), and National Health Institute (NIH). In addition, they have received recognition at national conferences for their work in TBI and PTSD and by Secretary Robert MacDonald for their VA-funded research related to Gulf War Veterans' concerns. The VA and national press have taken note of all of our contributions geared towards advancing the health of Veterans and have requested interviews and highlighted our projects in several publications.

### Educating Providers and Veterans

Education and risk communication remain at the heart of all of our efforts. Over the years, our team established educational services for Veterans and their providers at the local, regional, and national levels with the goal of advancing health care for Veterans. We have provided clinical education in classes designed specifically for Veterans by WRIISC experts on a number of topics. These include:

- ▶ Classes on environmental exposures from various deployments and other Domestic Military Exposure Concerns and
- ▶ Sessions on general health and wellness after deployment including Integrative Health and Wellness, Managing Chronic Symptoms, and Managing CMI.

The WRIISC regularly mentors post-graduate fellows and graduate or undergraduate students. We also sponsor fellowship seminars, trainee webinars, grand rounds sessions, and journal club meetings for staff members.

Veterans seen at the WRIISC for a comprehensive evaluation always receive personalized one-on-one health education and/or health education materials to support their complex symptom management and overall health. These include fact sheets developed by the WRIISC. We also publish this WRIISC Advantage newsletter tri-annually which focuses on health concerns and exposure topics prevalent in the Veteran community. Our WRIISC website also serves as a resource for Veterans and the health care community.



In addition to educating Veterans, we serve as an educational resource to VA clinicians by equipping providers with up-to-date information on key topics in post-deployment health. Over the last 15 years, we used multiple training methods to reach as many providers as possible. We produced VA Employee Education System (EES)-sponsored webinar series, Live Satellite Broadcasts which are also available on the Internet and DVD, in-person conferences and "Train the Trainer" seminars where attendees are trained to advance education and how to share their training with a wider network of providers. Recent efforts are focused on making post-deployment health education available online and on-demand for both VA and community providers. Our education efforts covered a wide range of critical post-deployment health issues including:

- ▶ Best practices and research findings on GWI;
- ▶ CMI assessment, treatment and management;
- ▶ Environmental exposures, including airborne hazard concerns;
- ▶ Integrative health and wellness, including behavioral medicine; approaches to treating pain, nutritional psychology, and yoga meditation;
- ▶ Cognitive problems including memory problems;
- ▶ Social reintegration issues; and
- ▶ TBI.

### Future Directions

While we hope you enjoyed a look back on some of our accomplishments throughout the past 15 years, rest assured that our focus remains on the future. Our staff continuously looks for ways to further advance our three-part mission to improve the lives of Veterans who served the US in a theater of combat and may now suffer with debilitating conditions. As part of Post Deployment Health Services within VA Patient Care Services, we will continue to promote better communication among Veterans, the providers of direct patient care, and our post-deployment experts. The WRIISC will continue to improve the care of Veterans! 🌐

# Around the WRIISC News



## NJ WRIISC

### Happy 15<sup>th</sup> Birthday, WRIISC

**NJ WRIISC STAFF** recently gathered to celebrate 15 years of the WRIISC's dedication to improving the lives of Veterans. NJ WRIISC



Director Dr. Drew Helmer hosted a brief meeting discussing the history of the WRIISC while touching on some of the Center's main accomplishments throughout the years. The NJ WRIISC team has continued to grow tremendously over the years; we've hired six new research assistants in the past 6 months to staff newly funded research projects! NJ WRIISC now has over 50 clinicians, researchers, educators, support personnel, trainees, and students collaborating to optimize the health of combat-deployed Veterans, especially those with difficult-to-diagnose or medically unexplained symptoms. We take pride in all of our accomplishments and the progress the WRIISC has made at all of its three sites.

## CA WRIISC

### Phone-based Meditation Class Increases Access to WRIISC Care

**SINCE 2010**, more than 2,000 Veterans have been referred to yoga at the CA WRIISC and the center increased access to yoga as a specialty service by providing yoga through clinical video telehealth to Veterans who receive care at community clinics. To date, more than 3,800 yoga sessions have been delivered through this method. A phone-based Yoga Nidra meditation class was recently launched for all VA enrolled Veterans, no matter which part of the country they reside in an effort to increase access. The



meditation class is based on iRest yoga nidra meditation, an evidence-based practice developed by Dr. Richard Miller and provided by iRest trained instructors from the CA WRIISC. Veterans call in to a secure phone line and join the class from the comfort and safety of their own home. All Veterans can be referred by their local clinician to the "IFC WRIISC Yoga Wellness" program in the computerized patient record system (CPRS). Feedback has been positive and provides the WRIISC with another tool to increase access to high quality specialty care. For more information, please check out: <http://www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov/clinical/integrative-health/ca/>.

## DC WRIISC

### Continuing to Grow

**IN JUNE 2012**, the DC WRIISC led a group of volunteers in the inaugural planting of what would become the "All Veterans' Garden."



VETERANS PLANT VEGETABLES IN THEIR "ALL VETERANS' GARDEN."

This exciting new endeavor, spearheaded by Dr. Katharine Bloeser, a Social Worker, was announced in the Fall 2012 WRIISC Advantage Newsletter. Since that time, the garden—and the Veterans and volunteers who work there—have flourished. The program expanded to include larger garden plots, and participation from several clinical departments across the DC VAMC. In realizing the strong therapeutic benefit of this program, and to better meet the clinical needs of the Veterans, the DC WRIISC partnered with Recreation Therapy. Now, the "All Veterans' Garden" is a clinical consult and a permanent offering in the DC VAMC. The DC WRIISC is proud to have initiated and nurtured this program and excited to watch it continue to grow. 🌐

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