

VA releases draft report on Gulf War care

BY TOM PHILPOTT

Veterans of the Persian Gulf War were exposed to a poisonous stew of environmental, chemical and biological dangers, which left thousands suffering from illnesses difficult to diagnosis or treat effectively.

These dangers included long-burning oil fires; destroyed stocks of chemical and biological agents; use of depleted uranium tank rounds; pesticides; special paints used to resist chemical agents; reported side effects from anthrax vaccines and pills intended to protect against deadly agents; nine varieties of infectious diseases; and blowing sand, dust and other particles that caused respiratory problems.

It took years for the U.S. government to acknowledge these combinations of harmful exposures. VA now presumes that certain chronic, unexplained symptoms, if present for six months or more, are related to Gulf War service and compensable. These include chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, gastrointestinal disorders and various undiagnosed illnesses.

Yet 20 years on, many Gulf War veterans still complain that VA physicians are surprised by their ailments or provide ineffective treatment. VA concedes knowledge and treatment gaps and that primary care providers are not well versed on the chronic, multisymptom illnesses of this group.

On May 13, the Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Task Force published in the *Federal Register* its most recent draft comprehensive report on ongoing efforts and new innovations. It is a "draft" report because the task force sought public comment, particularly from veterans, through June 13.

"I am scared that I am going to die or be in some serious medical problems before I hear anything back from anyone," read the first electronically filed comment, posted by a veteran who said she returned from the war with headaches and was later diagnosed with lupus and Sjögren's syndrome, as well as fibromyalgia and muscle spasms.

This third annual roadmap identifies gaps in services and the steps being taken to close them. Another goal is to apply the lessons learned in the handling of Gulf War veterans to improving services to post-9/11 veterans. The report also identifies seven areas of effort, two of which are in clinical care and provider education. The push is to integrate Gulf War specialty medical treatments into VA primary care to produce a more patient-centric approach to treatment.

Given the varied symptoms many Gulf War veterans display, and the difficulty in pinpointing causes of illnesses, the report says primary care providers need more help recognizing mental problems in veterans "as separate and distinct from physical health problems."

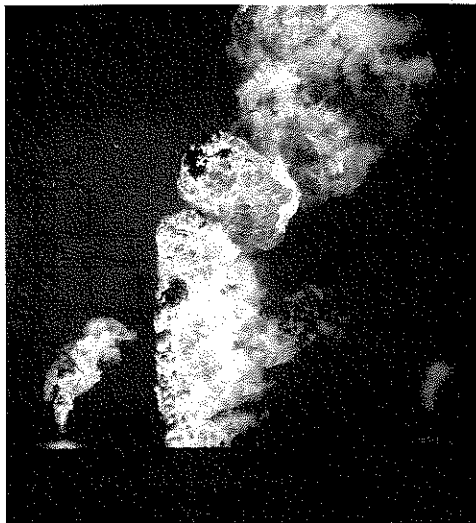
VA has launched a pilot program at the Salt Lake City VA Medical Center to better integrate mental health care in the primary care setting. By April, more than 60 front-line clinicians had been educated on Gulf War-specific conditions through meetings and conferences, pocket

cards that identify common Gulf War exposures and illnesses, and websites with more details on diseases and treatments.

The Veterans Health Administration also seeks to better educate primary care providers on the health effects of environmental hazards during the Gulf War. Usually only clinicians trained in occupational and emergency medicine have this expertise, the report says.

Other task-force initiatives are expected to smooth delivery of compensation, pension and other services to Gulf War veterans; improve data-sharing on these veterans with DoD; and use still-untapped sources of data to better track and understand their health challenges.

Tom Philpott, a Coast Guard veteran, has written about veterans and military personnel issues for more than 30 years.



Oil well fires blaze out of control outside Kuwait City on March 23, 1991. Smoke has long been considered a factor in many Gulf War veterans' undiagnosed illnesses. Photo by Air Force Tech. Sgt. David McLeod