

## Washington

# Cuts in eye-research funding hurt combat vets, advocates say

By Patricia Kime  
pkime@militarytimes.com

Advocates for blind and visually impaired veterans say Congress is shortchanging research for a common battlefield injury: eye trauma.

Roughly 16 percent of medical evacuations in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 to 2006 were because of combat-related eye injuries — and troops who suffer them usually don't return to duty.

About 20 percent of troops with eye injuries return to duty, while those who experience other combat injuries have an 80 percent return rate, according to the National Alliance for Eye and Vision Research.

Yet less money was directed toward traumatic eye-injury research in the proposed fiscal 2012 defense budget than in previous years.

In the House version of the 2012 defense appropriations bill, vision research, under the category of "congressionally directed medical research programs," would receive \$3.2 million, down from \$4 million this year. The Senate version of the bill has no funding for vision research.

In contrast, traumatic brain injury and psychological health research would receive \$125 million, up from \$100 million this year.

Research for non-combat-related conditions, such as breast cancer and prostate cancer, also stand to see vastly higher amounts of fund-

ing than vision research in the defense bill: \$120 million and \$64 million, respectively, if the House bill passes as written.

For the past 20 years, Congress has funded research in the Pentagon budget that is not part of the president's budget request, much of which is for conditions unrelated to military service.

For example, the 2012 defense funding bill contains \$5.1 million for research on tuberous sclerosis, a genetic disorder usually detected in childhood that affects roughly 50,000 Americans and causes seizures and developmental and intellectual disabilities.

"If [Congress] is trying to balance the budget by cutting funding for research for military eye trauma, try telling that to the moms and dads and the service members who are dealing with blindness," said Tom Zampieri of the Blinded Veterans Association.

The congressionally directed research programs are not the sole source of military medical research funding. The Vision Center of Excellence, established by Congress in 2008, is supposed to serve as a cutting-edge facility for military vision care and research, although its development has been slow.

The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency has, in the past, funded research for retinal prosthetics. And the proposed defense bill, HR 2219, includes \$50 million for "funding projects that enhance



SENIOR AIRMAN JULIANNE SHOWALTER/AIR FORCE

**An Air Force ophthalmologist prepares to cut a suture during a trauma surgery to repair a patient's eye at Joint Base Balad, Iraq.**

combat readiness and war fighter-relevant medical research."

But vision advocates said they are unsure whether any of those funds would go to eye trauma science.

One bit of welcome news in this area: The development of ballistics eyewear has greatly reduced the number of combat eye injuries. Still, 75 percent of service members who suffer traumatic brain injuries also report vision problems such as double vision, color blindness, loss of peripheral vision and total blindness.

"So much of your life is based on your ability to see," Zampieri said. "You can lose a leg and maybe stay on active duty. You lose your vision and you're out of a job."

In the current belt-tightening climate, advocates say they don't expect significant funding increases, but they plan to keep pushing.

Rep. Jim Moran, D-Va., a member of the House defense appropriations subcommittee and a longtime supporter of eye trauma research, described the funding as a duty.

"If we are going to send our armed forces in harm's way, then we have an obligation to invest in the development of the best possible care and treatment," Moran said. □

# Lawmaker looks to eliminate NJP in sexual assault cases

By Patricia Kime  
pkime@militarytimes.com

A California congresswoman has launched a crusade against sexual assault and abuse in the military, hoping to stop what she calls an "abomination" in the armed services.

Rep. Jackie Speier, a Democrat, has stood on the House floor every week since April 6 to discuss the military's history of sexual assaults, the Pentagon's handling of cases, and stories of abuse by and against service members.

The often graphic testimony, which details crimes ranging from the assault and rape of enlisted women in offices and on ships to forcible sodomy against men in showers, is intended to shock listeners into action, Speier said.

"If you have only 13 percent of victims reporting [assaults] and of those, 90 percent are involuntarily honorably discharged, that sends a huge message. The military says it has zero tolerance, but they don't. Those are words. Those aren't actions," Speier said.

The Defense Department estimates there are 19,000 cases of "unwanted sexual contact" in the military each year. In 2010, service members reported 3,158 incidents of sexual assault, according to the Pentagon's Sexual Assault and Prevention Office. That figure was down from 3,230 the previous year.

In 2010, commanders instigated 529 courts-martial against perpetrators of sexual assault, 52 percent of the disciplinary actions taken against offenders. In 2009, courts-martial made up 42 percent of disciplinary actions taken against offenders.

More than 90 percent of troops participated in sexual assault prevention training in 2010. But Speier said the military must do more to protect its personnel, prosecute offenders and change what she calls a "hostile work environment" for women.



Speier

"I feel like this is a time warp. In the civilian world, we dealt with the 'Oh, she was provocative; oh, she consented' in the '60s," she said. "Those were the excuses being offered up when we started taking rape seriously and identifying it as a violent crime."

Speier met in September with Defense Secretary Leon Panetta to discuss the issue and plans to introduce legislation that would require investigation of military sexual assaults by an entity outside the victim's chain of command.

She also said she would eliminate the authority of commanders to issue nonjudicial punishment for unwanted sexual contact.

"Nonjudicial punishment is an absurdity," she said. "NJP ... is given precisely to protect a perpetrator."

Until she sees results, she said she'll keep speaking and encouraging troops to email her their personal stories at stopmilitaryrape@mail.house.gov.

"As long as men and women who have been raped in the military come forward with stories they want told, I will be telling them on the floor of the House," she said. □

# No warning given in majority of '10 suicides

By Patricia Kime  
pkime@militarytimes.com

More than half of the 295 service members who committed suicide in 2010 had no known history of mental illness, and two-thirds told no one of their plans, a new Pentagon report discloses.

The 2010 Defense Department Suicide Event Report, released Sept. 20, showed that 43 percent of troops who committed suicide had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, and less than one-fourth were on mood-altering or antipsychotic medications when they died.

Of the one-third of suicide victims who told someone of their plans, most spoke to their spouses; about 4 percent spoke to friends, and a similar percentage to mental health specialists.

In a change from previous years, 5 percent of suicide victims communicated their intent by text message.

The Pentagon report, released annually since 2008, analyzes the demographics, method, history, context and health factors of active-duty and mobilized reserve component members who commit or attempt suicide.

The report is designed to help "characterize the nature of suicide events." It does not interpret risk factors that could lead to suicide; for example, it doesn't contain information about general populations that would aid in comparing data.

"For example, it is not possible to determine if owning a firearm is a risk factor for suicide without determining the rate of owning a firearm in the overall military population," the report said.

However, efforts are underway to gather such information, according to the report. □

The preferred suicide method among service members is by firearm, accounting for 62 percent of the deaths last year. About 14 percent used their military-issue weapon; the rest used a privately owned weapon.

A common thread among suicides is a history of relationship trouble before the event. In 2010, roughly half had experienced a breakup with a spouse or significant other, most within 90 days of their deaths.

The issue of troops hiding their internal struggles continues to vex military leaders, who said at a Sept. 9 congressional hearing that they are confounded by the continued deaths of those who show no

evidence of hopelessness.

"I just had a soldier recently under my command commit suicide," said Rep. Joe Heck, R-Nev., an Army Reserve colonel. "He was actually seen two hours earlier by another member of his unit. Both had been through the Army Reserve Suicide Prevention Training Program. The colleague did not recognize anything that was out of the ordinary."

The 295 suicides in 2010 included 160 soldiers, 59 airmen, 39 sailors and 37 Marines.

Since DoD began issuing its event report in 2008, more than 95 percent of suicides have been male. Two-thirds to three-quarters of them were under age 29. □