Epidemiology of psychiatric disability without posttraumatic stress disorder among U.S. Army and Marine Corps personnel evaluated for disability discharge

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Abstract

Psychiatric disorders are a common reason for disability discharge from the U.S. military. Research on psychiatric disorders in military personnel evaluated for disability discharge has historically focused on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet 40% of service members evaluated for a psychiatric-related disability do not have PTSD. This study's objective was to describe characteristics and correlates of disability in Army and Marine Corps personnel diagnosed with psychiatric disorders other than PTSD. In this cross-sectional study, the chi-square and Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney tests compared the distribution of demographic, disability and deployment characteristics between those evaluated for non-PTSD psychiatric disability (N = 9125) versus those evaluated for any other non-psychiatric condition (N = 78,072). Multivariate logistic regression examined associations between disability retirement and demographic and disability characteristics. Results show a significantly higher prevalence of disability retirement, deployment, and comorbidity among Army and Marine Corps personnel evaluated for disability discharge related to a non-PTSD psychiatric disorder. Mood disorders, anxiety disorders and dementia were the most commonly evaluated psychiatric disorders. Characteristics associated with increased odds of non-PTSD psychiatric-related disability retirement includes being in the Marine Corps (OR = 1.24), being black (OR = 1.29) or other race (OR = 1.33), having a combat-related condition (OR = 2.50), and older age. Service members evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disability have similar rates of disability retirement as those evaluated for PTSD, suggesting non-PTSD psychiatric disorders cause a severe and highly compensated disability. Additional research is needed describing the epidemiology of specific non-PTSD psychiatric disorders, such as depression, in service members evaluated for disability discharge.

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1. Introduction

Psychiatric disorders are a major health concern for the U.S. military and are associated with high health care utilization, lost workdays, attrition and disability discharge (Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center, 2012a, 2013b; Cohen et al., 2007 and Gubata et al., 2013a,b). Prevalence of psychiatric disorders in service members increased substantially since beginning military operations in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom, OIF) and Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom, OEF) and is estimated to be between 11% in service members returning from Afghanistan and 37% in veterans seen at a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care facility (Hoge et al., 2006; Sareen et al., 2007 and Seal et al., 2007, 2009). Over the course of OIF/OEF, Department of Defense and VA health care providers observed steep increases in service members seeking psychiatric-related ambulatory visits and hospitalizations (Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center, 2012c, 2013a,b,c,d; and Wells et al., 2011). Additionally, OIF/OEF veterans with psychiatric disorders have higher utilization rates of non-psychiatric medical services (Cohen et al., 2007). Health care of service members and veterans with psychiatric disorders is not restricted to the Military Health System, as 27%–41% of recent service member hospitalizations occurred in non-military hospitals (Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center, 2013d, 2014). Consequently, both military
and non-military health care services may continue to experience a growing demand for health care from service members or veterans with psychiatric disorders.

Psychiatric disorders in military personnel are often detected through pre- and post-deployment health assessments, hospitalizations, primary care appointments, or psychiatric ambulatory appointments (Hoge et al., 2006; Seal et al., 2007). Common psychiatric disorders diagnosed in military populations include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, alcohol abuse/dependence, adjustment disorder, and anxiety disorder (Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center, 2012; Felker et al., 2008; Miliken et al., 2007; and Seal et al., 2007). Risk factors associated with psychiatric disorders, mental health care use and attrition in military populations include serving in the Army (relative to other services), combat exposure, and deployment to a combat zone (Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center, 2012; Hoge et al., 2006; Polusny et al., 2009; Sareen et al., 2005; Wells et al., 2010; and Wojcik et al., 2009). Other characteristics associated with higher rates of post-deployment psychiatric disorders include being female, younger than 25 years, enlisted, or active duty component, or having a combat-specific occupation or a pre-deployment diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder, particularly depression or anxiety disorder (Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center, 2007, Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center, 2012; Seal et al., 2009; and Wojcik et al., 2009).

Psychiatric disorders are a common reason for disability discharge in the military. Since the start of OIF/OEF, psychiatric disorders, led by PTSD, mood disorders and anxiety disorders, were ranked within the three most common medical condition types found in service members evaluated for disability in all services (Bell et al., 2008; Gubata et al., 2013; and Niebuhr et al., 2011). Psychiatric disorders are a leading cause of discharge for medical conditions found to have existed prior to service, and affective and nonpsychotic psychiatric disorders ranked in the top five conditions diagnosed during disability evaluations occurring within the first year of service (Gubata et al., 2013). Service members evaluated for a psychiatric disorder disability are more likely to be medically retired or separated, particularly after deployment to a combat zone, than those diagnosed with any other condition type (Bell et al., 2011; Creamer et al., 2006; and Piccirillo et al., 2012). Many of the separations occur within one year of first diagnosis of the psychiatric disorder (Creamer et al., 2006; Hoge et al., 2005).

Prevalence and correlates of psychiatric disorders have been extensively studied in military populations, but historically this research has focused on PTSD or on psychiatric disorders as a whole. Bell et al. (2011) examined risk factors for psychiatric-related disability discharge in Soldiers, but did not differentiate between PTSD and other psychiatric disorders. In comparing disabling conditions of medically retired or separated Army Soldiers during peacetime and war, Patzkowski et al. (2012) found a significantly higher frequency of psychiatric disorders in 2009 than 2001, but did not explain whether the two-fold increase in unfitting psychiatric disorders was driven by the greater than 50-fold increase in PTSD. Another recent study described temporal trends of PTSD-related disability in the Army and Marine Corps, but PTSD accounts for only 60% of all psychiatric-related disability evaluations (Packnett et al., 2012). Little is known on the epidemiology of psychiatric disorders unrelated to PTSD that were severe enough to affect a service member’s ability to continue military service.

The objective of this study was to describe characteristics and correlates of disability in Army and Marine Corps personnel diagnosed with non-PTSD psychiatric disorders and to compare this population to those evaluated for disability related to any other non-psychiatric disorder. This study also aims to identify the most common disabilities for both condition categories and to investigate whether the rate of evaluations for non-PTSD psychiatric disability changes over time. A better characterization of the prevalence and correlates of risk for military disability related to non-PTSD psychiatric disorders is needed in order to understand their burden on both service members and the military health care and disability systems.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

This cross-sectional study examined disability related to non-PTSD psychiatric disorders among U.S. Army and Marine Corps personnel and was performed under a minimal risk human use protocol approved by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research Institutional Review Board.

When a service member becomes seriously injured or ill, each military service is responsible for determining whether his medical conditions renders him unfit for military service and for providing compensation equitable to his level of impairment in earning capacity (Under Secretary of Defense, 1996). Upon illness or injury, the service member is referred into the Disability Evaluation System (DES) where he is examined and evaluated by two informal medical boards. If the DES determines the service member can no longer continue military service, the DES assigns a disability medical code to each medical condition based on the Veteran’s Administration Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD). Attached to each VASRD is a disability rating, expressed as a percentage between 0% and 100%, reflecting the amount of compensation the service member is entitled. All assigned disability ratings for each individual condition are used to calculate a total disability rating, which is considered when assigning a final disposition. Soldiers receiving a total disability rating of 20% or less are usually separated with a one-time severance payment, while those receiving a rating of 30% or greater are eligible for disability retirement benefits, which include lifetime monthly retirement pay, medical care, and use of military facilities (Under Secretary of Defense, 1996).

2.2. Study population

All Army and Marine Corps personnel evaluated for disability discharge at the Army Physical Disability Agency (PDA) or Secretary of the Navy Council of Review Boards (CORB) between October 1, 2004 and September 30, 2011 (Fiscal Years 2005—2011) were eligible for inclusion. Since Army and Marine Corps personnel evaluated for disability have similar demographic and disability characteristics and deployment exposures relative to Navy and Air Force personnel (Gubata et al., 2013), the study population was limited to Army and Marine Corps.

Eligible service members were categorized into two groups (non-PTSD psychiatric disorders and All Other non-psychiatric conditions) based on the service member’s medical conditions at the disability evaluation. The VASRD was used to identify each service member’s medical conditions and general medical condition category (e.g. arthritis) for each condition. Service members within the non-PTSD psychiatric disorder category were identified using VASRD codes for psychiatric disorders (9200—9599), excluding those evaluated for disability related to PTSD (9411). Service members placed into the non-PTSD psychiatric disorder group were evaluated for disability related to one or more conditions within the following categories as identified by the VASRD: dementia, schizophrenia or other psychotic disorder, mood disorders (e.g. depression), anxiety disorders or phobias, somatoform or pain disorders, dissociative disorders, chronic adjustment disorders other than PTSD, and eating disorders (e.g. anorexia). The
nomenclature employed in the psychiatric disorder rating schedule is based on diagnostic criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (USC, 2011, July). Therefore, presence of a psychiatric disorder VASRD code indicates the PDA or CORB determined the service member was unfit for duty due to a service-connected psychiatric disorder alone or in conjunction with other service-connected medical conditions. The All Other group included service members evaluated for any other medical conditions (e.g., asthma), excluding those evaluated for any psychiatric disorder.

2.3. Data sources

The PDA and CORB provided disability evaluation data on Army and Marine Corps personnel, respectively, and included demographic and service-related characteristics, medical review dates, evaluation results and date, combat-related determinations, VASRD codes and percent disability ratings. Since evaluations resulting in total percent ratings of 30% or greater are eligible for disability retirement, ratings were categorized as 30% or greater and less than 30%. Age was categorized into the following groups: younger than 20 years; between 20 and 29 years; between 30 and 39 years; and, 40 years and older. Race was categorized into white, black and other. Length of time to final disposition was determined as the duration in months between first diagnosis and assignment of final disposition.

If a service member’s condition may change in severity over time, he or she may be evaluated for disability more than once. For individuals with multiple evaluations, demographic variables were derived from the record with the earliest date, while final disposition, percent rating and combat-related determination were collected from the most recent disability record. All unique VASRD conditions from all records per service member were included in assessing average number of VASRDs per person and most common disabilities or comorbid conditions. For the non-PTSD psychiatric group, any non-psychiatric disorder present during the disability evaluation was considered a comorbid condition. Since disability records do not identify a primary medical condition, comorbid conditions could not be ascertained in the All Other group.

The Defense Manpower Data Center, Seaside, California, provided service begin and end dates, deployment characteristics, and counts of total military population by year and service. Time in service was calculated as the duration between the service member’s first entry date and most recent end date. All overseas deployments in support of OIF/OEF between October 1, 2001 and September 30, 2011 were included. Service members were categorized as deployed if deployed at any time during the study period.

2.4. Data analysis

Service-specific incidence rates of non-PTSD psychiatric disability were calculated per 10,000 service members per year based on total military population counts. The Cochran–Armitage test for linear trend was utilized to investigate the relationship between fiscal year and non-PTSD psychiatric disability evaluation.

Frequency distributions were generated to describe demographic, disability and deployment characteristics of the study population, stratified by service and disability condition type. Chi-square and Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney tests compared the distribution of demographic, disability and deployment characteristics between the two condition categories, stratified by service. Means and standard deviations were calculated to assess average service length, average length from first evaluation date to final determination date, and average number of condition codes.

Frequency distributions were also used to identify the most common general medical condition category for each disability category. Service members with more than one condition within the same general medical condition category were counted only once within that category. The chi-square test compared the prevalence rate in the Army with the prevalence rate of the same condition in the Marine Corps.

Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression models computed unadjusted and adjusted odds ratios to assess associations between disability retirement (i.e. permanent or temporary disability retirement) and demographic and disability characteristics stratified by disability condition type. The adjusted model controlled for combat relatedness and the following demographic and service-related characteristics at military entry: age, gender, race, service, rank and component. Statistical analyses were performed using SAS version 9.3 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC).

3. Results

The rate of non-PTSD psychiatric disability evaluation significantly decreased in the Marine Corps during the study period ($Z = -7.6, p < 0.001$) ranging from a high of 11.0 per 10,000 Marines in 2007 to a low of 4.0 per 10,000 Marines in 2011 (Fig. 1). The Army’s rate of non-PTSD psychiatric disability evaluation did not significantly change during study period ($Z = 1.7, p = 0.10$).

The study population was mainly comprised of white enlisted active duty males under the age of 30 at their first evaluation for disability discharge (Table 1). For the Army, distributions for all demographic variables were slightly, yet still statistically, different for those evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disorder versus those with any other non-psychiatric medical condition. A substantially larger proportion of Soldiers evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disability had been deployed (62.3%) when compared to the All Other group (49.6%). For the Marine Corps, only age at first evaluation and deployment status were significantly different between the two condition categories. Substantially fewer Marines under age 20 were evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disorder disability, while a larger proportion of Marines who deployed were evaluated for non-PTSD psychiatric disorder disability (47.7%) than any other disability (38.9%).

![Fig. 1. Rate of non-PTSD psychiatric disability evaluation by service and fiscal year of first evaluation 2005–2011.](image-url)
In Table 2, characteristics related to disability evaluation are compared between the non-PTSD psychiatric group and the All Other group for each service. In both services, a substantially larger proportion of individuals evaluated for non-PTSD psychiatric disability were medically retired (69%) and received a percent rating of greater than 30% (Army 69.7%; Marine Corps 71.5%) than those evaluated for any other disability. A larger proportion of individuals in the non-PTSD psychiatric disorder group (Army 20.0%; Marine Corps 21.0%) had conditions deemed related to combat than the All Other group (Army 8.2%; Marine Corps 17.9%). Individuals evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disability had, on average, slightly more conditions, a longer length of service, and were evaluated for disability longer than the All Other group.

Approximately half of Army and Marine Corps personnel...
evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disability had a mood disorder (Table 3). Among those evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disability, the Army had significantly higher rates of spinal disease (21.3%) and anxiety disorders (20.9%), whereas the Marine Corps had higher rates of dementia (26.9%), traumatic brain injury and its residual effects (TBI; 26.2%), and schizophrenia (7.6%). For the All Other group, musculoskeletal conditions and paralysis were the most common conditions in both services, yet the Army (29.6%) had nearly twice the rate of spinal disease than the Marine Corps (15.1%). The non-PTSD psychiatric group (Army 13.7%; Marine Corps 26.2%) had a substantially higher rate of TBI than the All Other group (>2%).

Table 4 presents characteristics associated with increased odds of non-PTSD psychiatric-related disability retirement, which includes being in the Marine Corps (AOR = 1.24; 95% CI = 1.08–1.42), being black (AOR = 1.29; 95% CI = 1.13–1.47) or other race (AOR = 1.33; 95% CI = 1.14–1.55), or having a combat-related condition (AOR = 2.50; 95% CI = 2.19–2.85). Odds of disability retirement related to a non-PTSD psychiatric disorder also increased as age increased, with those aged 40 years or older having three-fold higher odds of disability retirement than service members in their twenties. For those evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disorder, individuals aged 40 years or older or within the black and other race category had higher odds of disability retirement than those within the same age or race category in the All Other group.

4. Discussion

Results of this study show a significantly higher prevalence of disability retirement, deployment, and comorbidity among Army and Marine Corps personnel evaluated for disability discharge related to a non-PTSD psychiatric disorder when compared to those evaluated for any other non-psychiatric condition. Approximately 40% of service members evaluated for a psychiatric-related disability do not have PTSD (Gubata et al., 2013b). In this study, nearly 70% of Army and Marine Corps personnel evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disorder disability were medically retired, which is more than double the proportion medically retired without a psychiatric disorder. In comparison, approximately 80% of Army and Marine Corps personnel evaluated for disability related to PTSD were medically retired (Packnett et al., 2012). Taken together, these findings suggest a large number of Army and Marine Corps personnel evaluated for a psychiatric-related disability have a psychiatric disorder unrelated to PTSD, and that their psychiatric disorder often causes a severe and highly compensated disability.

The demographic characteristic with the highest odds of non-PTSD psychiatric-related disability retirement are those 40 years or older, who have more than three times the odds of those in their twenties. In addition, odds of disability retirement for those 40 years or older in the non-PTSD psychiatric disability group was double that of service members of the same age evaluated for any other non-psychiatric condition. This is consistent with prior research that found that older service members have higher odds of psychiatric-related disability (Bell et al., 2008a). In addition, although younger service members have higher rates of psychiatric disorders overall (Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center, 2012c and Seal et al., 2009), these higher rates are driven by higher rates of PTSD and drug and alcohol abuse, whereas older service members have higher rates of depression (Seal et al., 2009). Nonetheless, additional research is needed to further explain the high odds of disability retirement in older service members with a non-PTSD psychiatric disorder.

The increased prevalence of psychiatric disorders, particularly depression and anxiety, after deployment or exposure to combat has been well documented (Booth-Kewley et al., 2013; Felker et al., 2008; Sareen et al., 2007; and Wells et al., 2010). This study found similar results as a larger proportion of service members evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disorder disability had been deployed and had a combat-related condition. In addition, there was a strong association between disability retirement and being evaluated for a combat-related condition for both condition groups. These findings highlight the need for continued pre- and post-deployment screenings, as well as interventions and training designed to mitigate the stressors placed on deployed military service members, especially those whom experience combat. Although deployment has been shown to be associated with psychiatric disorders, 38% of Army and 52% of Marine Corps service members evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disability had never been deployed during the study period. Additional research is needed to examine the relationship between demographic characteristics, military occupation, deployment history and psychiatric diagnoses that progress to psychiatric-related disability to target treatments and determine whether mental health care needs differ in those who deploy.
Service members evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disorder were evaluated for significantly more conditions, indicating non-PTSD psychiatric disorders often present with comorbid conditions, similar to PTSD disability (Packnett et al., 2012). For the non-PTSD psychiatric disability group, the most commonly evaluated condition categories were mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and dementia. This finding is consistent with prior studies which found mood and anxiety disorders were common mental health diagnoses in service members seeking mental health care and were common reasons for psychiatric disability (Felker et al., 2008; Gubata et al., 2013; Milliken et al., 2007; Seal et al., 2007 and Wojcik et al., 2009). Mood and anxiety disorders are also the most common psychiatric disorder types in the general U.S. adult population (Reeves et al., 2011). TBI was also more prevalent in Army and Marine Corps personnel with psychiatric disorders, consistent with prior research indicating mild TBI, or concussion, is associated with psychiatric disorders in service members (Booth-Kewley et al., 2013; Carlson et al., 2010 and Hoge et al., 2008). Further examination of dementia, seen in 15–30% of those evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disability, revealed that the vast majority of dementia in these service members was related to brain trauma (results not shown). Musculoskeletal conditions, particularly spinal disease, arthritis and limitation of motion of joint, are the most common conditions present in Army and Marine Corps personnel evaluated for disability (Gubata et al., 2013b); thus, these conditions were expected to be common among both the non-PTSD group and the All Other group. Identification of the most common psychiatric disorders and comorbidities in this population could be applied by policy makers and health practitioners in improving screening for non-PTSD psychiatric disorders, for example additional psychiatric health screenings in those diagnosed with TBI. In addition, future research on dementia in the military disability population may help in identifying a relationship between psychiatric disorders, TBI, and dementia.

Strengths of this study include the large study population and comprehensive data capture that includes demographic and service-related characteristics spanning the entire study period.

However, several limitations should be considered in interpreting these results. Psychosocial and occupational data as well as indicators for drug and alcohol abuse were not available for this study. Recent research has found psychosocial factors and occupational stressors, including low satisfaction with leadership, lack of social support, and longer than expected deployment length are predictors of psychiatric disorders in military personnel (Booth-Kewley et al., 2013 and Buckman et al., 2011). Further, an individual was categorized as deployed if deployed at any time during the study period and therefore a temporal relationship between deployment and onset of the psychiatric disorder could not be assessed. These results may not be generalizable to the civilian population since this population was largely comprised of young adult white males whom were pre-screened for psychiatric disorders prior to joining the military. In addition, this study identified psychiatric disorders using the VASRD, which was developed to assign compensation based on occupational impairment, and are not clinical diagnoses. However, previous studies found general VASRD condition categories assigned during disability evaluation were often consistent with primary International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision (ICD-9) condition categories assigned during hospitalizations occurring prior to disability evaluation (Bell et al., 2008b; Hoge et al., 2005).

This study has shown that Army and Marine Corps personnel evaluated for a non-PTSD psychiatric disability have similar rates of disability retirement as those evaluated for PTSD, suggesting that non-PTSD psychiatric disorders often severely impair the military readiness of service members. Therefore, the results of this study may be of interest to both health care providers who serve military and veteran populations and researchers focused on psychiatric conditions as they highlight that the psychiatric disabilities affecting service members and veterans are not limited to PTSD. Additionally, veterans diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder were found to use significantly more VA non-psychiatric health care services than veterans without a psychiatric disorder (Cohen et al., 2010). Consequently, health practitioners at the VA and civilian health care facilities may experience an increase in veterans seeking both
psychiatric and non-psychiatric health care. Psychiatric disorders, not just PTSD, may continue to be a major health concern for the U.S. military and it is crucial continued policies, interventions and treatment programs are implemented to ensure health care needs of service members with psychiatric disorders are met.

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**Conflict of interest statement**

The authors have declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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