



Australian veterans' health: Afghanistan

Al-Qaeda mounted terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11th, 2001. A month later the US Government announced the waging of a war on Afghanistan to eliminate the Taliban-led government there. None of the twin-tower terrorists had been Afghani, but the Taliban was claimed to be harboring leaders and members of Al-Qaeda.

Australia pledged to assist the US in their 'War on Terror' from the outset, and Australian troops remain in Afghanistan to this day.

In the service of so called 'international security', they work to disrupt insurgent operations, train and mentor members of the Afghan National Army and Police, and otherwise assist the Afghan Government.

Death and injuries in Afghanistan

Australia's average contribution to the war in Afghanistan is 1,550 Australian Defence Force personnel. Approximately 800 additional personnel provide support in the broader Middle East area, including a naval contingent.

To 22 April 2013, 39 Australians had died in Afghanistan as a result of engagements with insurgents, rocket attacks, improvised explosive devices, internal attacks by Afghan Army members ('green on blue attacks') and helicopter crashes.

To 22 April 2013, 252 Australians had suffered war-related injuries including amputations, fractures, gun shot wounds, hearing loss, lacerations and traumatic brain injury, and some from the combined effect of multiple severe injuries.



ADF soldier, outskirts of Tarin Kot, Afghanistan

The long-term health consequences

The Department of Veterans Affairs reported in 2011 that 997 Afghanistan Veterans have ongoing health conditions as a result of their service. The Department has identified a total of 2,325 medical conditions in Afghanistan veterans, with veterans having an average of 2.3 conditions each. The most commonly identified are hearing problems, including tinnitus and hearing loss, and mental health problems. Other long-term consequences may not yet be known.

Impact on mental health

The Department of Veterans Affairs in 2011 had officially diagnosed 187 soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder, with depressive disorders, alcohol dependence and alcohol abuse other commonly diagnosed conditions. In 2012 the Defence Force confirmed that four Afghan war veterans had committed suicide since returning home. While Australia remains in Afghanistan, and with an increasing number of 'green on blue' attacks, these numbers are expected to rise.

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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD results from intense negative experiences, including threatened and actual physical harm, major loss of personal freedom or infringement of personal principles. Long-term symptoms include avoidance of reminders of the event, and distressing unwanted recollections – vivid flashbacks or nightmares. Sufferers remain emotionally on edge, unable to enjoy normal social interaction. Their symptoms include sleeplessness, anxiety, irritability, depression and mood swings, as well as social withdrawal and alcoholism.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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