



Veteran Mental Health Initiative  
Research to restore lives

## Senate Inquiry on Transition from the Australian Defence Force (ADF): Submission by Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation (GMRF)

### Problem Description

The Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme facilitated by DVA, is a recent and comprehensive study examining the impact of military service on the mental, physical and social health of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members, and their families. Two recent reports on mental health prevalence and pathways to mental health care have identified the following key problem areas:

- ***The timing of intervention*** with veterans can be vital to mental health outcomes. The early transition stage has been identified as a critical stage in the readjustment process to civilian life. The transition process may trigger or exacerbate mental health symptoms leading to a range of difficulties including: employment difficulties, family/relationship conflict, and substance abuse problems.
- ***Estimated rates of 12-month mental health diagnoses*** were lowest in the sample of Transitioned ADF who were less than 12 month transitioned, and increased post 12 months. This points to the importance of the timing of assessment and intervention, as mental health conditions may occur a significant period of time after the administrative processes of transition has occurred.
- ***The Mental Health Prevalence report found that 46.4%*** of ADF members who had transitioned from full-time service in the past five years met 12-month diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder, with anxiety disorders being the most commonly diagnosed mental health condition. Over half of this sample had a comorbid mental health condition which is important to note as it may be an indicator of disorder severity and impact on treatment outcomes.
- ***Approximately, one in five transitioned ADF personnel experienced suicidal*** ideation, plans or attempts in the prior twelve months.
- ***Transitioned personnel who were no longer engaged with the ADF in any capacity*** (i.e., inactive and active reservist roles) were at an increased risk of developing a mental health condition. Maintaining some level of contact with the ADF appears to be protective and those that are most disengaged are at highest risk.
- ***The Transitioned ADF personnel had significantly greater severity*** of current self-reported symptoms of psychological distress, depression, anxiety, anger, suicidality and alcohol use, compared to a 2015 sample of regular ADF personnel.

- The rate of 12-month mental health disorder identified, in combination with increased severity compared to regular ADF personnel, highlights ***the importance of targeting personnel transitioning from full-time military service***, for targeted screening, assessment and support services.
- Examinations of pathways to mental health care found that while initial engagement and uptake of services is high, ***limited numbers of veterans received evidence based psychological treatment and there were high levels of dissatisfaction with service providers***.

## Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation

The Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation (GMRF) aims to investigate, translate, educate and integrate new and innovative treatments, interventions and educational programs to enhance the health and wellbeing of veterans and their families. Through the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Veteran Mental Health (VMH) Initiatives, GMRF is focused on the psychological, social, and physical health of the Australian veteran and ex-service community. The purpose of the PTSD Initiative is to build a strong foundation of clinical research in PTSD so as to enrich our knowledge base and inform prevention and new treatment options that can be used by contemporary healthcare professionals. Similarly, the purpose of the VMH Initiative is to build a strong foundation of mental health research among the contemporary veteran cohort, which will generate evidence to guide developments in procedures and practices to improve the wellbeing of the veteran community.

Since 2013, The Returned and Services League (RSL) Queensland Branch, has committed \$6.75 million to support the research of GMRF in reducing the prevalence and severity of mental health issues, and assist with the transition to civilian life for ADF personnel.

## GMRF's Veteran Reintegration Study

The Veteran Reintegration Study is a five-year undertaking in partnership with RSL Queensland that commenced in 2015 and will continue until 2020. The aim of the study is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges ADF members experience during the transition process, as well as determine the factors that lead to effective transition and successful reintegration into the civilian community. This is an extremely important area to understand to improve the mental health and wellbeing of veterans, as evidenced by the findings of the Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme.

The Veteran Reintegration Study is comprised of multiple projects, each addressing the overall aim of developing and translating knowledge to improve the transition process. A summary of each project can be found below, in addition to how each study relates to the terms of reference of the current senate inquiry.

### 1. A Systematic Review of Reintegration Following Discharge from Military Service

A systematic review was conducted of the existing scientific literature pertaining to the reintegration experience following discharge from military service. The aim of the study was to identify, describe and synthesise the literature, particularly focusing on psychological adjustment experiences. A total

of 18 studies, representing four countries, were subject to thematic analysis. This study has been completed and will be published in Volume 26, No.2 issue of the Journal of Military and Veterans Health (July 2018).

The key finding of the study highlights a crucial psychological adjustment process faced by military personnel transitioning into civilian life. This study relates specifically to the **Terms of Reference Point 2** of the current inquiry in terms of improving the quality of mental health care services supporting veterans who are reintegrating into civilian life. Veteran mental health services and clinicians should be aware of the unique difficulties and psychological processes of a veteran who is in the process of transition and reintegration. Mental health clinicians working with veterans should be adequately trained in how to effectively assess for and address these specific psychological processes inherent in the transition from military to civilian life.

## **2. Qualitative Investigation of Transition out of the ADF**

In 2016, a qualitative investigation was conducted consisting of in-depth interviews and focus groups aimed at thoroughly identifying the issues and challenges facing veterans who had recently discharged from the military. Participants included 60 former ADF personnel, 20 partners of former ADF personnel and 20 health care professionals with experience working with former military personnel. The investigation specifically focussed on cultural reintegration and psychological adjustment to civilian society. This was the first qualitative study to be conducted on transition in Australia and one of the largest to be conducted globally. The qualitative results are currently being prepared for publication and have also informed the subsequent transition projects. This study relates specifically to the **Terms of Reference Points 1 - 4** as the themes identified in the research refer to Ex Service Organisations (ESO) engagement, mental health care, and areas for improvement in the transition process.

## **3. Development and Validation of a Military-Civilian Psychometric Assessment Tool**

There is currently no validated assessment tool that measures psychological and cultural 'readiness' of military personnel transitioning into civilian life following military service. Without a reliable assessment tool it is difficult to accurately assess the specific needs of individuals as they transition from military to civilian life and target support accordingly. Following the qualitative investigation of transition, a psychometric assessment tool was developed and is currently being trialled within Australia. As this self-report questionnaire is the only tool to be developed and validated with Australian service veterans, it is expected to have a significant impact on assessing the specific needs of current and former ADF personnel throughout the transition process.

This project relates specifically to the **Terms of Reference Points 1, 2 and 3 of the current inquiry**. The early detection of transition difficulties will highlight more accurately which ESO's may be of relevance and benefit for the transitioning individual, hopefully guiding more tailored referrals and enhancing ESO engagement (Point 1). The project findings will guide recommendations regarding improvements to the current model of mental health care through the transition period for veterans (Point 2). The project will also provide invaluable insights into the relationship between reintegration and psychological conditions, while early detection of transition difficulties through the tool may also have a mitigating impact on the development of mental health issues in this population (Point 2). Once trialled and validated, this tool can be used throughout Australia in both clinical practice and

research, which may improve the transition and reintegration process for future generations (Point 3).

This assessment tool has been developed and is currently in the process of being validated. Once validated, the psychometric tool can be utilised for the following purposes:

- a) Standardised assessment of psychological adjustment and cultural reintegration difficulties among transitioning and former service personnel to allow identification of individual needs and tailored support.
- b) Early detection tool to help flag potential reintegration difficulties before they occur and provide those identified as 'at risk' with early intervention.
- c) An outcome measure for reintegration or psychosocial interventions/programs.
- d) To be used in further research on transition and adjustment of veterans post service.

#### **4. An Investigation of Veterans' Transition to Civilian Employment**

A comprehensive literature review as well as qualitative thematic analysis was conducted regarding the experiences of obtaining and retaining employment among veterans. This specifically included data from 35 participants who had discharged from the ADF between the years of 2006 to 2016. This study identified key factors that impacted upon veterans' ability to obtain and retain civilian employment post-discharge, via 1:1 interviews. These key findings have guided the development of RSL Queensland's Transition to Employment initiative. This project relates specifically to the **inquiry's examination of employment pathways for transitioning veterans**. The findings of this project are currently being prepared for publication.

#### **5. Development of Education Modules for RSL QLD Transition to Employment - Employer Ready Initiative**

The RSL Queensland 'Employer Ready' Initiative comprises an important part of the RSL 2020 Transformation program. The Employer Ready Initiative will provide a platform to educate potential employers of veterans about their value in the workplace. The key objective of this initiative is to promote veterans on their merit as a highly employable untapped resource pool for Australian businesses, as well as address barriers to veterans retaining employment as identified by the research.

The Employer Ready Initiative will help employers identify and understand:

- Key social and cultural differences between civilians and veterans in the workplace;
- Transferable skills and attributes of veterans;
- What makes veterans valuable to an organisation; and
- Myths and misconceptions about veterans

The Employer Ready Initiative will be delivered through a series of e-learning modules, which are currently undergoing pilot testing and evaluation. This project relates specifically to the **inquiry's focus on examining current employment pathways for transitioning veterans**.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the aforementioned studies, in the context of the terms of reference, our recommendations are as follows:

- I. The early transition stage has been identified as a critical stage in the readjustment process to civilian life and the potential development of mental health conditions. As such, early screening and assessment to detect those most at risk of poor transition is vital in the prevention of mental health deterioration.
- II. Examinations of pathways to mental health care found that while initial engagement and uptake of services is high, limited numbers of veterans receive evidence-based psychological treatment and there remains a high level of dissatisfaction with service providers;
  - a. Further resources and initiatives specifically focussed on the provision of evidence-based treatments and access to service providers with expertise in transition issues are necessary.
  - b. Mental health clinicians working with veterans should be adequately trained in the effective assessment and treatment of the specific psychological processes inherent in the transition from military to civilian life.
  - c. Veteran service providers within ADF and DVA should be also be required to demonstrate competency in delivering evidence-based interventions and reporting on outcomes for each patient.
- III. There is reportedly a lack of knowledge within currently serving ADF members regarding ESOs in general as well as confusion as to the services that each ESO provides and who is eligible for the service. In addition, information about ESOs reportedly reaches ADF members on an ad-hoc basis. As such, we recommend a comprehensive approach regarding ESO information dissemination, particularly regarding the services each local ESO provides and the eligibility criteria to access these services for both current and former ADF members.
- IV. Currently there is reportedly a gap between ADF and DVA mental health services when a member discharges from the ADF. There needs to be a handover process by which health care providers on the ground are able to efficiently and effectively provide up-to-date information to a new treatment team. A case management approach would ensure coordination of health care as well as navigation of services offered by ESOs.
- V. Any government initiatives aimed at facilitating effective transition to employment as well as civilian life in general, should be evidenced-based and subject to regular evaluation to demonstrate outcomes.