

Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel – 6 February 2017

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Defence

Topic: Research on Suicide

Question reference number: 6

Senator: Kakoschke-Moore

Type of question: Written

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 23 March 2017

Question:

1. Since 2009 there have been a number of reports and studies, which have undertaken research into mental health, as relevant to the Australian Defence Force. These include:
 - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - Incidence of suicide among serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel 2001–2014 - <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=60129557674>
 - Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies at University of Adelaide conducted the 2010 ADF Mental Health Prevalence and Wellbeing Study – completed in 2011 - <http://www.defence.gov.au/Health/DMH/Docs/1MHPWSreport-Frontmatter.pdf>
 - The Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention at Griffith University – A Review of the Australian Defence Force Suicide Prevention Program – Report to the Department of Defence, released 2012
 - Literature review, Suicidal behaviour and ideation among military personnel: Australian and international trends, released 2016 – funded under Dept of Veterans’ Affairs Applied Research Program and was conducted by the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention <http://www.dva.gov.au/health-and-wellbeing/research-and-development/health-studies/suicidal-behaviour-and-ideation-among>
 - Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme - <http://www.defence.gov.au/Health/DMH/ResearchSurveillancePlan.asp>
2. Who within the Department of Defence is tasked with receiving this research, and undertaking the analysis of these documents to identify trends and inform ADF policy?
3. Does this fall to a particular office or is it a Department –wide task?
4. In light of this history of extensive evidence gathering, does the Department of Defence have a long term strategy regarding research into mental illness?

5. Does the Department have a long term strategy regarding research?
6. As noted on page 8 of the Department of Defence's submission, Defence and DVA have commissioned the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to undertake research into suicide by ex-service members. Once this report has been released,
 - a) who is responsible for receiving these results; and
 - b) is there a co-ordinating project team between DVA and Defence who will take these results and develop strategies to inform future policies and procedures?

Answer:

1. These research activities, reports and studies are part of the work undertaken by the Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs.
2. Within Defence, research is received by Joint Health Command, and analysed by the Mental Health Psychology and Rehabilitation Branch and the Strategic Health Coordination Branch. These studies help to inform the way Defence plans health care services for serving and ex-serving personnel into the future, and reinforces the significant investment already made by Defence to improve mental health and rehabilitation services.
3. Depending on the research undertaken, Joint Health Command will liaise with internal and external strategic research stakeholders to develop a Departmental-wide response. Mental Health Psychology and Rehabilitation Branch coordinate research working group meetings with stakeholders from all areas of the Department to review the deliverables, discuss the research implications, and inform decisions to improve policy development and service delivery arrangements.
4. A key objective within the Australian Defence Force Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy is to build an evidence base about military mental health and wellbeing, and the projected outcome is a rigorous research program that is priority driven and addresses key knowledge gaps.

Key priority areas arising from the 2010 Australian Defence Force Mental Health and Wellbeing Prevalence Study were identified in the 2011 Australian Defence Force Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Plan. Action from this Plan led to Defence and the Department of Veteran's Affairs collaborating on the Transition and Wellbeing Research program in 2015 to initiate a longitudinal focus on those who had participated in the 2010 study, and were either still serving in 2015 or had transitioned to civilian life since 2010.

The Defence Human Research Advisory Board has been established to facilitate a strategic perspective of Defence human and animal research. The membership includes representatives from key research areas at Director General level (including Director General Mental Health, Psychology and Rehabilitation), representatives from Australian Defence Human Research Ethics Committee, and the three low-risk panels. Additionally, the Department of Veterans' Affairs have a representative on the Board.

5. The Department of Veterans' Affairs Research Board has been established to provide strategic level direction on research priorities for the Department of Veterans' Affairs. The Board includes Defence representatives and reports to the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commissions.

Through this Board, Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs developed a strategic research framework to improve the coordination of veteran and military research. This framework consists of four targeted research streams: longitudinal studies, predictive modeling, family studies and interventional research. This framework was developed to enhance collaboration and reduce duplicated effort while capitalising on available research resources, including the extensive data holdings of both agencies.

6. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) is responsible for publishing the results of the study into *Incidence of Suicide among Serving and Ex-serving Defence Personnel*. While the study has been commissioned by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Department of Defence have worked closely to progress the research. It is expected that the detailed final report, due to be published by the AIHW in September 2017, will be considered by Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs together with the findings from other activities such as this Inquiry and the National Mental Health Commission *Review of suicide and self-harm prevention services available to veterans and members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF)*, to determine future actions to strengthen efforts to prevent suicide and self-harm amongst current and former serving members of the ADF.

Together Defence and Department of Veterans' Affairs will jointly interpret the results and develop strategies for future policy and practice. The coordinating point for both departments for interpretation of the results of the report and the development of strategies for future policy and practice will be the Defence Links Steering Committee.