

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

TO

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
DEFENCE AND TRADE**

***REVIEW OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, TRADE AND DEFENCE ANNUAL
REPORTS 2000-2001***

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RECOMMENDATION 1:

The Department of Defence should, in preparing reports of unacceptable behavior, separate incidents into 'serious' and 'less serious'. The types of behaviour that fall into these categories should be defined in the report (paragraph 3.40).

Government Response:

Not Agreed. Notwithstanding the type of unacceptable behaviour reported, Defence treats all complaints as serious. Although sexual offence allegations may be graded as 'more serious' than sexual harassment, general harassment, discrimination or fraternisation complaints, the division of complaints into levels of seriousness would be an arbitrary exercise.

The full circumstances pertaining to a complaint of unacceptable behaviour and how that complaint is managed affects the complainant(s), the respondent(s), witnesses and management differently. It is not uncommon for minor issues to escalate to a serious level, where parties in an incident pursue extraordinary avenues to deal with the issue.

'Seriousness' of complaints may be viewed from a variety of perspectives that could involve physical harm, criminal activity, litigation, intense media or parliamentary attention, security implications, mismanagement, early resignation or retirement of parties, adverse effects on the workplace or the differing perceptions of individuals. Accordingly, Defence refrains from grading complaints on the basis of seriousness.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

The Department of Veterans' Affairs should develop an information package clarifying what Australian Defence Force conditions of service equate to under the provisions of the *Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986* (paragraph 4.19).

RECOMMENDATION 3:

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should develop information fact sheets for all deployments covered by DVA, stating what benefits and assistance are available to Australian Defence Force personnel serving on those deployments. This information should be posted on the DVA website (paragraph 4.20).

Government Response:

Agreed: In 1997, the current descriptions of warlike and non-warlike service now used by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) were added to earlier terms so that ADF conditions of service would equate to the provisions of the *Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986* (the Act). Since 1997, the Minister for Defence has been responsible for determining the criteria for both the ADF and the Act. Warlike service and non-warlike service under the Act mean service in the ADF of a kind determined in writing by the Minister for Defence.

There is a wide range of fact sheets already existing that describe specific benefits provided under the Act. These are listed under the broad headings of disability compensation, income support and treatment benefits. Access to these fact sheets is available from the Department's website (go to www.dva.gov.au/factsheets/default.htm).

A project is nearing completion that will list individual deployments since World War II together with indicators as to the broad categories of benefit that are available.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

The Department of Defence should develop a compulsory survey questionnaire which should be provided to all ADF personnel three to six months after returning from an operational deployment. This survey is in addition to the ADF Census which is held every four years (paragraph 4.28).

Government Response:

Agreed. Systems now in place collect data on all of the factors identified by the committee.

The 'Return to Australia Psychological Screen' questionnaire is administered in the area of operations just prior to the member returning to Australia or as soon as possible after the member's return. The questionnaire consists of:

- Deployment Experience Questionnaire – questions relate to unit morale, positive and negative deployment experiences, career intentions pre- and post-deployment, and anticipation of homecoming issues.
- Kessler 10 Questionnaire – a widely used ten-item scale designed to provide a general measure of psychological well-being.
- Traumatic Stress Exposure Scale (Revised) – a 13-item scale which provides a measure of both the frequency of traumatic exposure and the impact these exposures might have had on the member.
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist – a 17-item scale which aims to assess all recognised post traumatic stress disorder symptoms (as listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fourth Edition: American Psychiatric Association, Washington DC*).
- Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test – a 12-item questionnaire developed by the World Health Organisation as a screening instrument for problematic alcohol consumption levels.
- Major Stressors Questionnaire – a 36-item scale designed to measure the impact common deployment stressors might have exerted on deployed members.

Secondly, three to six months after the return-to-Australia date, members are also required to undergo a 'Post Deployment Psychological Screening', which involves the administration of the ADF Mental Health Screen questionnaire. This questionnaire consists of the re-administration of the Kessler 10 Questionnaire, the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist and the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test.

Defence recently added an item addressing the issue of how a member's deployment affects their family to the 'Return to Australia Psychological Screen' questionnaire.

The processing of the Return to Australia Psychological Screen and ADF Mental Health Screen questionnaires has been streamlined recently with the introduction of new scanning technology. This development accords with the committee's proposal that post-deployment data be collected in a format which can be "easily compiled and tabulated" (at paragraph 4.27).

RECOMMENDATION 5:

The ADF Census should be amended to ensure that a person in a defacto relationship is no longer regarded as 'single' (paragraph 4.29).

Government Response:

Agreed. The 2003 Census will contain the following question for ADF members:

What is your current marital status?

- Married
- De facto (ADF recognised)
- De facto (not ADF recognised)
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Single/never married.

A similar question in the previous census, in 1999, only asked whether a member was currently married or in an ADF-recognised de facto relationship.

ADF defacto policy is contained in DI(G) PERS 53-1, *Recognition of Defacto Marriages*. This defines a de facto spouse as "a person who is living with the member as a spouse on a genuine domestic basis although not legally married to the member." A person in a recognised de facto relationship is treated as a married member for entitlement purposes. Not all relationships satisfy ADF requirements for a recognisable de facto relationship. Members in a non-recognised de facto relationship are treated as single members for entitlement purposes.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

The Department of Defence must ensure that the use of decompression periods for all ADF personnel returning from operational deployments is mandatory (paragraph 4.51).

Government Response:

Not Agreed. ADF personnel returning from operational deployments are best managed with a degree of flexibility that allows commanders to make decisions based on the best interests of their subordinates. Evidence provided to the committee, and cited in the committee's report (at paragraph 4.41), indicates that this approach is being used effectively.

Extant demobilisation policy requires returning personnel to be medically and psychologically screened. Other support is available from a range of sources, including the Defence Community Organisation and chaplains. The nature of the deployment should drive the need for any period of 'decompression'. Personnel returning from highly-traumatic operations will need more careful management than others, where the need for recreation leave, for example, may outweigh the need for immediate transitional strategies.

RECOMMENDATION 7:

The Auditor-General should consider conducting a performance audit focusing on transition management programs conducted by the Department of Defence (paragraph 4.76).

Government Response:

Agreed. The audit topic will be considered for inclusion in the Australian National Audit Office's Audit Work Program 2003-04, which is expected to be discussed with the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit early in 2003.

RECOMMENDATION 8:

The Department of Defence should provide access to outplacement services for all ADF personnel as part of the Career Transition Assistance Scheme (paragraph 4.89).

Government Response:

Agreed-in-Principle. A feasibility study has been conducted to determine the method and viability of implementing this recommendation. At a minimum, implementation would require supplementary funding of \$1 million per annum. A decision to proceed will be subject to Defence funding priorities.

RECOMMENDATION 9:

The Department of Defence should provide access to specialised employment services for the spouses of ADF personnel (paragraph 4.90).

Government Response:

Agreed-in-Principle. A review of the Defence Spouse Employment Assistance Program, completed in August 2002, recommended the provision of access to specialised employment services, as well as a number of other options to enhance the employment assistance services provided to spouses of ADF members. A decision to proceed with any or all of these options will be subject to Defence funding priorities.