



UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



Eastern Colorado Health Care System
Denver, CO
VA Salt Lake City Health Care System
Salt Lake City, UT

OVERVIEW

Suicidality is an important public health concern, and research suggests that Veterans are at particular risk.

In 2005, the Veterans Administration awarded a Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC) to VISN 19 with the direction to conduct research, educational activities, and clinical work focused on addressing suicidality in the Veteran population.

Information regarding the VISN 19 MIRECC can be found at <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/>.

MISSION

The mission of the VISN 19 MIRECC is to study suicide with the goal of reducing suicidality in the Veteran population. To carry out this mission, members of the VISN 19 MIRECC:

- Focus on cognitive and neurobiological underpinnings that may contribute to suicidality.
- Develop evidence-based educational and clinical materials to identify and optimally treat Veterans who are suicidal.
- Provide consultation regarding assessment and treatment planning for highly suicidal Veterans.
- Mentor researchers in the area of suicidology.
- Collaborate with others in the study and treatment of Veterans who are at risk of suicide.

RESEARCH

Areas of research include: executive functioning and suicide; functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), positron emission tomography (PET), and MR spectroscopy of psychiatric illness; traumatic brain injury (TBI) and negative psychiatric outcomes; post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicide; pharmaceutical and psychotherapeutic treatments to reduce suicide; and the development of a suicide nomenclature. Information regarding the Self-Directed Violence Classification System can be found at <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/education/nomenclature.asp>. The VISN 19 MIRECC has established successful collaborative relationships with a variety of civilian (e.g., Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, The University of Utah Brain Institute) and military systems (e.g., Department of Defense, Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center) which have facilitated research and subsequent dissemination of findings. Information regarding specific research projects can be found at http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/VISN_19_Current_Research.asp.

EDUCATION

Educating the public, VA providers, community health care professionals, and consumers regarding Veteran suicide prevention is an additional aim of the VISN 19 MIRECC. Special emphasis has been placed on reaching providers who may be treating Veterans who are not seeking care within the VA system. Efforts include outreach to community mental health providers, health educators, and members of the brain injury treatment community. The MIRECC has sponsored and conducted three TBI and Suicide conferences in an effort to educate and disseminate information to VA and community health care professionals on topics related to TBI, psychiatric symptoms, suicide, and executive dysfunction. In response to the need for materials aimed at assisting family members of Veterans, the VISN 19 MIRECC, in collaboration with the Office of Mental Health Services and the Center of Excellence, Canandaigua, NY, created a series of educational products. "Information and Support After a Suicide Attempt: A Department of Veterans Affairs Resource Guide for Family Members of Veterans Who are Coping with Suicidality" is an online resource that provides sources of information and

support to Veterans, their family members, and their care providers. A set of three guidelines for talking to children (4-8 years, 9-13 years, 14-18 years) about a family member's suicide attempt provide an outline of how and what to say to children about the topic of suicide. ACE cards are wallet-sized, easily-accessible, and portable tools on which the steps for being an active and valuable participant in suicide prevention are summarized. The accompanying brochure elaborates on each step, discusses warning signs of suicide, and provides safety guidelines. VISN 19 MIRECC educational products can be found at http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/VISN_19_Education.asp.

CLINICAL

The VISN 19 MIRECC Suicide Consultation Service was developed to address patient and provider needs, and is staffed by an interdisciplinary group of clinicians with expertise in suicide. Diagnostic conceptualization and treatment recommendations are provided to VA inpatient and outpatient mental health clinicians. Typical referrals address questions including the extent to which cognitive impairment is contributing to suicide risk, the relationship between trauma history and suicidality, and therapeutic (e.g., psychotherapy, medication) options for managing chronic suicidality and/or psychiatric distress. The assessment model employed involves a flexible combination of reviewing medical records, conducting a comprehensive clinical interview, administering psychological and neuropsychological testing, including self-report measures of suicide-related constructs, and/or collecting collateral data (e.g., interviewing significant others/caregivers).

SELECTED RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Brenner, L. A., Betthausen, L. M., Homaifar, B. Y., Villarreal, E., Harwood, J. E., Staves, P. J., & Huggins, J. A. (2011). Posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and suicide attempt history among Veterans receiving mental health services. *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1111/j.1943-278X.2011.00041.x.

Brenner, L. A., Breshears, R. E., Betthausen, L. M., Bellon, K. K., Holman, E., Harwood, J. E. F., ...Nagamoto, H.T. (2011). Implementation of a suicide nomenclature within two VA healthcare settings. *Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings*. Advance online publication.

Kim, N., Mickelson, J. B., Brenner, B. E., Haws, C. A., Yurgelun-Todd, D. A., & Renshaw, P. F. (2011). Altitude, gun ownership, rural areas, and suicide. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 168(1), 49-54.

Osman, A., Gutierrez, P. M., Wong, J. L., Freedenthal, S., Bagge, C. L., & Smith, K. D. (2010). Development and psychometric evaluation of the Suicide Anger Expression Inventory-28. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavior Assessment*, 32, 595-608.

Wortzel, H. S., Gutierrez, P. M., Homaifar, B. Y., Breshears, R. E., & Harwood, J. E.F. (2010). Surrogate endpoints in suicide research. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 40, 500-505.

LEADERSHIP

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