



Supporting Mental Health of Women Veterans

On April 24th, 2012, the “Supporting the Mental Health of Women Veterans” conference was held at the Baltimore VAMC. Sponsored by the VISN5 Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center (MIRECC) and supported through funding from the Office of Mental Health Services (OMHS), the goal of this conference was to provide VA staff, veterans, and community agencies with information on the mental health service needs of women veterans. Over 70 VA mental health providers and veterans from across the VISN attended the day-long conference, which included presentations from a number of national experts in the field of women’s health as well as opportunities to discuss ways to improve access to and the quality of care of services for women veterans.

Several of the morning presentations focused on specific mental health needs or concerns often experienced among women veterans. First, Dr. Amy Drapalski, a researcher at the VISN5 MIRECC, provided an overview of VHA Women’s Health programs and OMHS women’s health priorities. Dr. Marcia Valenstein, Director of the Depression Health Services Research Evaluation and Management (DREAM) Program and Associate Director for Research Programs for SMITREC, presented information on the mental health service needs and utilization in women veterans with depression. Dr. Catherine Harrison-Restelli, staff psychiatrist for the Primary Care-Mental Health Integration Program within the VAMHCS, discussed special considerations regarding the mental health of women veterans of recent conflicts. In her presentation, Dr. Amy Street, a clinical psychologist with the Women’s Health Sciences Division of the National Center for PTSD and Director of the Education and Training Division of the Office of Mental Health Services’ National Military Sexual Trauma Support Team discussed the impact of combat and military sexual-related trauma on the mental health of women veterans.



The afternoon presentations focused on two areas of women’s health that are often less likely to be considered or discussed but are of growing concern among women veterans—reproductive health care and parenting. Dr. Bimla Schwarz, Associate Professor of Medicine within the Division of General Internal Medicine and Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and Senior Medical Expert in Reproductive Health Services Research for the VA, spoke about the reproductive health care concerns and psychotropic medication prescribing considerations for women veterans. Finally, Dr. Joanne Nicholson, clinical and research psychologist and Professor of Psychiatry at the Dartmouth Psychiatric Research Center, discussed parenting among women with mental illness and ways to support women veterans in their parenting role.

The conference concluded with an interactive group discussion aimed which provided additional opportunities for attendees to discuss the needs of women veterans and generate ideas about how the VA can best address those needs and create better services for our women veterans.

To view slides presented at the Women’s Health & SMI Conference, please visit our website:

http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/slide_presentations.asp