

Points of Excellence

The Newsletter of the VISN 17 Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans

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The VA VISN 17 Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans is dedicated to conducting research that serves to improve the quality of life of our nations Veterans and foster the wellbeing of their families.

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Moving On Up



LTC(R) Michael Russell, Ph.D.

Greetings from the Center of Excellence, and our second quarterly newsletter! We received great feedback about the first edition, and I am looking forward to this publication being a long lasting feature of the new Center of Excellence.

Back when I wore a uniform and commanded a Combat Support Hospital, I had an awesome radio handle: Scalpel Six. “Six”, in military slang, is the Commander, and Scalpel was an apt call sign for a surgical unit – not a bad job at all, particularly for a psychologist, to have. A decade later I am about to have to think up a new radio handle, as the CoE is about to go mobile and undertake the epic task of moving into its new building on the Waco campus. The business core has obtained a set of handheld radios to ease the communications burden as all the pieces come together from warehouses located all around Central Texas.

This new CoE building has been a decade in the making, and was custom designed from the ground up for its new research purpose. When we occupy this space it will effectively triple our capacity, but also give us a qualitative change: The New CoE Building will give us wet lab capability. This will let us explore the biological underpinnings of TBI and PTSD in ways not possible to us before.

I look forward to announcing a ribbon cutting on the new building as soon as we get a move in date. Construction is substantially complete, but the contractor is still working to correct the deficiencies that were found in the initial inspection. It is really an exciting time to be here at the Center of Excellence!



Dr. Castillo at the World Health Organization

In January, Dr. Diane Castillo, Chief of the CoE’s Treatment Core, was a speaker at the World Health Organization Expert Group Meeting on Mental Well-being, Disability and Humanitarian Action in Manila, Philippines.

The group was convened to establish recommendations for treating traumatic stress after natural disasters and emergencies.



“My invitation was to be able to provide that information on evidence-based therapies for PTSD and how individuals dealing with disasters throughout



Above: Expert panel convenes at WHO Regional Office in Manila. Lower Left: Diane Castillo talks to the group about current best practices for trauma-focused treatment

the world could benefit from that.”

Dr. Castillo was one of only 15 international representatives from academic institutions, United Nations’ agencies, and governmental and non-governmental organizations to participate in the meeting, which was co-sponsored by the National Center for Neurology and Psychiatry in Japan, the University of Tokyo and the Tohoku University, and the United Nations University.

Welcome Our New Staff



Sheila Frankfurt, Ph.D. is an OAA Postdoctoral Fellow working with Dr. Russell. Dr. Frankfurt recently completed her Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology at the University of Minnesota and she is currently working on a research project at Fort Hood. Dr. Frankfurt's research focuses on the role of moral injury as a moderator of PTSD.



Christina Hejl, B.S. is a Medical Technologist working in the Biomarkers & Genetics Core. As an ASCP-certified technician, Ms. Hejl has significant experience with serology and she will be running ELISA testing to detect marinobufagenin levels in participant samples for the MBG study with Dr. Puschett.



Marie Hines, M.S. is a psychological technician working on Project S.E.R.V.E. As an Army Veteran, Ms. Hines strongly values the education, discipline, cultural-competency, and leadership training that she received in the military, and she is dedicated to helping Veterans have a voice in VA research.



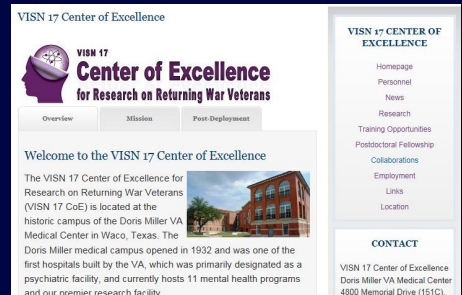
Jeisa "J.J." Jones, M.S. is a psychological technician working on Project S.E.R.V.E. Though she is originally from Puerto Rico, J.J. is very familiar with Central Texas. As the proud wife of an OIF Veteran and a former employee of Fort Hood and Darnall Army Medical Center, J.J. is well versed in addressing the needs of Veterans and their families.



Heidi La Bash, Ph.D. is an OAA Postdoctoral Fellow working with Dr. Castillo. Dr. La Bash recently completed her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at the University of Nevada, Reno, and she is currently working as a study therapist on the ACT for PTSD/SUD study. Dr. La Bash's research is about the roles of guilt and shame in the development and maintenance of PTSD symptomatology.

New CoE Website

Last October, the Center of Excellence unveiled its new website, complete with news archives, information about our current studies, and information for research participants and prospective trainees.



Please visit us at:

www.mirecc.va.gov/visn17/index.asp

Find Us on Facebook



As of March 1, 2016 our Facebook page has reached 10,769 unique users, with our posts

being displayed more than 22,000 times! With our current 190 Followers we are hopeful to expand our reach in the next Quarter. We post updates about important VA information, Veteran related events, and activities that COE staff are participating in.

If you haven't visited or Followed our Facebook page, please VISIT, LIKE, and SHARE! Our CoE Facebook page is regularly updated with news about our Center, research updates, and helpful information for Veterans and their families.

Please find us at:

www.facebook.com/WacoCenterofExcellence

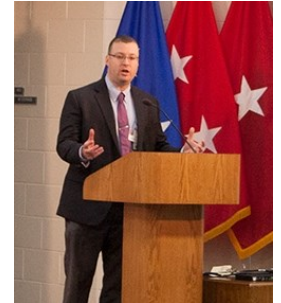
CoE Reaches Out to AUSA



Dr. Richard Seim meeting with leaders from Camp Mabry National Guard Base and the Capital Area and 4th Region of AUSA

Due to the positive audience response, Dr. Seim has been invited to speak at the convention of the 4th Region of the AUSA in Houston this May.

In February, Dr. Richard Seim, gave an invited address to the Capital Area chapter of the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) at Camp Mabry in Austin. Dr. Seim’s talk was on the innovative treatments for PTSD and comorbid conditions being developed at the CoE. “The AUSA is a wonderful organization of Veterans, and I was quite honored to present to such an esteemed group,” said Seim.



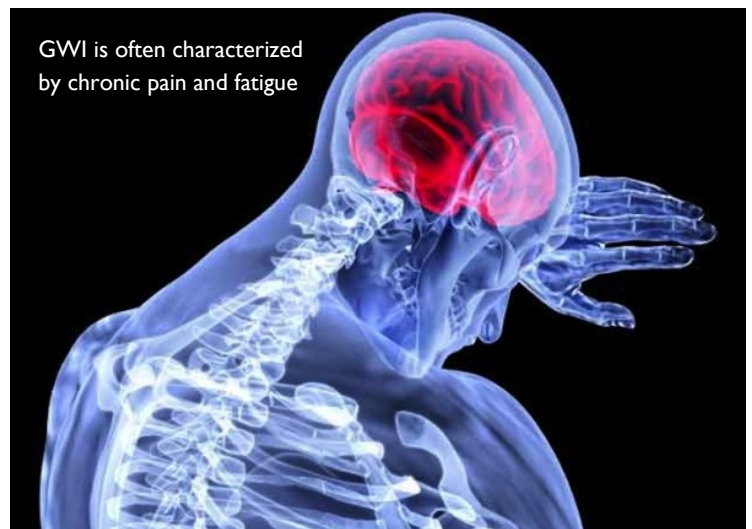
Due to the positive audience

Medication Trial for Gulf-War Illness

Over one third of the 697,000 men and women who participated in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm between 1990 and 1991 have developed a combination of symptoms including chronic pain, skin rashes, stomach cramps, fatigue, sleep problems, concentration issues. This condition, known as Gulf War Illness (GWI), has no psychiatric origin. Instead, it is a poorly understood physical condition without a cure.

To help shed light on GWI and to offer help to our Desert Storm Veterans, Dr. Dena Davidson and her colleagues are directing a medication trial to investigate two promising treatments

for some of its symptoms. This study, known as REGIONS (Research Examining Gulf-war Illness in Our Nation’s Service-members) is currently



the only study in the nation examining possible pharmaceutical treatments for GWI.

Recently, Dr. Davidson was interviewed on KWBU 103.3 (Waco NPR affiliate) to talk about GWI and the potential benefits of this research. You can listen to the interview here:

www.kwbu.org/post/qa-dena-davidson-gulf-war-illness

To learn more about the REGIONS study, please call the study coordinator at 254-297-3954.

Project SERVE Reaches Recruitment Milestone

Project S.E.R.V.E. (Study Evaluating Returning Veterans' Experiences) is a family of longitudinal studies with a long history at the Center of Excellence. It began in 2008 as a small pilot study with Veterans who served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, as part of Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, and New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND).

After successful completion of this pilot study, the next phase of the study (known as SERVE-FX) followed over 300 Veterans, each for a one-year period. The data gained from SERVE-FX led to numerous research articles and scientific presentations, advancing our understanding of how deployment can affect Veterans. FX was such a success that the researchers were able to secure approval and funding for the next study, SERVE-FX2.



Dr. Eric Meyer and the SERVE Team (above). Psychological Technician, Corina Mendoza working with a Veteran (below left).

After running strong for two years, the SERVE Team is pleased to announce that FX2 has now recruited over 400 Veterans to participate in this phase of their research. The team is committed to increasing our knowledge and understanding of how OEF/OIF/OND Veterans react to stress and potentially traumatic events encountered in theater and how they adapt after returning to civilian life. Our aim is to use this information to contribute to the advancement of treatments and services provided through the VA to better serve our Veterans.

If you would like more information about Project SERVE, please call 254-297-5175.



Central Texas Hackathon



Psych Tech, Kimi Brown, and colleagues present their proposal to the group

Last month, several CoE staff (Drs. La Bash, May, and Mignogna along with psych tech, Kimi Brown) attended the "Hackathon for Veterans with PTSD" one of two national symposia sponsored by the VA's Center for Innovation. The event brought together computer programmers and PTSD experts to propose ways of improving trauma-focused care for Veterans.

The Newest Member of Our Team

On November 30th, Dr. Bryann DeBeer and her husband welcomed their new baby boy, Emerson Patton DeBeer. Emerson weighed 8 lbs., 1 ounce and was 19.5 inches long at birth, and, at only three months old, he is already known for his smile. Congratulations, Bryann!

Staff Spotlight



SFC(R) Victor Robinson provides administrative assistance and logistical support to the Center of Excellence’s management team. Mr. Robinson is a highly decorated Army Veteran with over 20-years of active duty service, which included two combat tours (Iraq and Kosovo), two overseas tours (South Korea and Germany) and trips to over 20 other countries. He has received over 30 coins from senior military leadership and he holds the coveted Glen E. Morrell Award, the highest achievement award in the Army Recruiting Command. In 2015, Mr. Robinson graduated Cum Laude with a B.S. in Organizational Leadership, and he was recently inducted into the National Society of Leadership & Success, a chapter of Sigma Alpha Pi.

Originally hailing from Virginia, Mr. Robinson now lives in Killeen, Texas with his wife and daughter. He also has a son who is away at college. Mr. Robinson’s goal is to provide excellent customer service and to support research that serves to improve Veterans’ lives.

Project ROBI Set to Launch

The neuroimaging core has launched Project ROBI (Regulating Oscillations in Brain Injury) to test the therapeutic effect of neurofeedback on symptoms of traumatic brain injury (TBI). The brain naturally produces a small amount of electricity, and oscillating patterns of electricity are referred to as brainwaves; these can be measured by an electroencephalogram, or EEG.

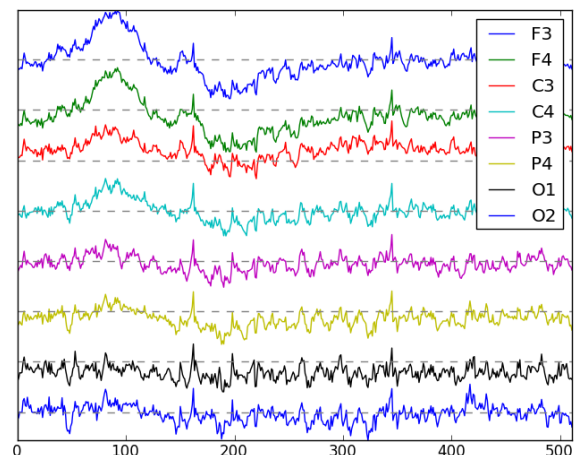
For many years, therapists have taught patients with TBI to change their brainwaves, and their symptoms often improve after therapy. Clinical trials have demonstrated that neurofeedback can treat epilepsy and certain symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

This trial, ROBI, will be the first clinical trial of neurofeedback for traumatic brain injury. The study will be time-intensive, requiring 8 hours of evaluation before and after treatment, and 20 sessions each lasting 45 minutes.

For more information about this study, please call the Study Coordinators at 254-338-5435.



Neurofeedback uses electroencephalography sensors (above) to detect and help patients learn to change specific brainwave patterns (below)



Recent CoE Publications

Here is a sample of some of the recent articles published by our researchers:

Castillo, D. T., Chee, C. L., Keller, J., Nason, E., C'de Baca, J., Qualls, C., Fallon, S. K., Haaland, K. Y., Miller, M. W., & Keane, T. M. (in press). Group-Delivered Cognitive/Exposure Therapy for PTSD in Women Veterans: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, Policy*.

Cruz, L. N., Kline, E., Seidman, L. J., Minor, K. S., **Meyer, E. C.,** Iati, C., Zimmet, S., & Friedman-Yakoobian, M. (In press). Longitudinal determinants of client treatment satisfaction in an intensive first episode psychosis treatment program. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*.

DeBeer, B. B., Konecky, B. D., & Meyer, E. C. (in press). Depression, Anxiety Disorders and Other Disorders. In N. D. Ainspan, C. J. Bryan, & W. E. Penk (Eds.), *Handbook of Psychosocial Interventions for Veterans: A Guide for the Non-military Mental Health Clinician* (pp. TBD). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Gilmore, A. W., **Nelson, S. M.,** & McDermott, K. B. (in press). A parietal memory network revealed by multiple MRI methods. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*.

Martindale, S. L., Morissette, S. B., Kimbrel, N. A., **Meyer, E. C.,** Kruse, M. I., Gulliver, S. B., & Dolan, S. L. (in press). Neuropsychological Functioning, Coping, and Quality of Life among Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans. *Rehabilitation Psychology*.

Taft, C. T., Murphy, C., & **Creech, S. K.** (in press) *Trauma-Informed Therapy with Partner Violent Perpetrators*. Washington DC, American Psychological Association.

Kudos

- **Dr. Eric Meyer** was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor of Psychiatry & Behavioral Science through the College of Medicine at the Texas A&M Health Science Center.
- **Dr. Richard Seim** was recently elected to the Board of Directors of the Waco Chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).
- The **Million Veteran Program** has finished data collection. Congratulations to their research team and thank you to all Veterans who participated in this study.
- **Allyson Cope**, an undergraduate research intern from Tarleton State University, was accepted to a study abroad program in Ecuador this May.
- **Loren Losli**, an undergraduate research intern from Baylor University, presented a poster at the annual conference of the National Association for Professional Development Schools in Washington, D.C. this month.

Veteran of the Day



VA
#VETERANOFTHEDAY
MICHAEL RUSSELL

On November 8th, Dr. Russell was named Veteran of the Day by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Dr. Russell was recognized for his over 24 years of service in the Army, his command of the 47th Combat Support Hospital (1998-2000), and his current work with Veterans.

TexVet Symposium

In February, the TexVet Initiative and the Texas A&M Health Science Center co-hosted a large symposium to align clinicians, researchers, and Veterans advocates from around the state. A central theme of the event was on the innovative research being conducted at the CoE, and several CoE investigators (Drs. DeBeer, Creech, Frankfurt, Meyer, and Russell) gave presentations and participated in a Q&A panel discussion. With over 300 attendees, this collaborative event was an enormous success.



Above: Drs. Meyer, Creech, Copeland, DeBeer, & Frankfurt (left to right) answer questions about PTSD, violence, and suicide

Right: LTC Christopher Warner, M.D., U.S. Army, discusses misunderstandings about combat-related PTSD



Project SERVE in the News

A recent podcast of Division 12 of the American Psychological Association featured a discussion about how the Project SERVE family of studies has informed what we know about resilience, traumatic brain injury, depression, and PTSD in Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. To access the interview with Dr. Timothy Elliot, go to: <https://soundcloud.com/apadiv22/podcast-02-jan-2016>

VISN 17

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<http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn17/index.asp>

