



VA Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Assessment, Evaluation, and Treatment Consultation Demonstration Project

Background

The United States Pacific Command of the Department of Defense (DoD) employs more than 300,000 active duty and civilian personnel dispersed worldwide. Similarly, the Honolulu VA Medical and Regional Office center is responsible for providing services to veterans residing in the Pacific Region from Alaska to Guam and from Seattle to American Samoa. Given the vast geographic considerations and decreasing resources, providing first-rate, cost-effective healthcare to active duty personnel and veterans throughout the Pacific Region requires innovative approaches to accessing healthcare by utilizing the most recent advances available in technology.

PTSD results from exposure to traumatic, usually life-threatening events, ranging from combat to natural disasters to severe accidents. It is a disorder that can be refractory and severely disabling, and affects 8% of the general population. The incidence of PTSD rises considerably among those who have served in the military, particularly if they have been exposed to combat. Approximately 15% - 30% of Veterans suffer from the symptoms of PTSD. Similar results are anticipated among military personnel, especially active duty who have been exposed to combat.

The current care provided to veterans on the neighbor islands does not routinely provide for psychological assessment and treatment related to disorders such as PTSD. Access to PTSD treatment for those living in American Samoa, Guam and other Pacific Islands ranges from extremely limited to none. The proposed project offers the possibility of enhancing treatment provided to patients at remote sites in the Pacific Region. The success of the project may serve as a model for telepsychiatric interventions and psychological debriefings for preventing acute stress reactions in personnel exposed to traumatic events such as combat and natural disasters, in the DoD Pacific Health Care System.

The project will explore the feasibility of using telemedicine technology to diagnose, evaluate and provide clinical consultation for individuals who are suffering from the aftereffects of severe, traumatic stress. Expertise will be drawn from the staff of the National Center for PTSD as well as colleagues in the VA and DoD who are familiar with the utilization of telemedicine technology. The proposed project supports the commitment by the Telemedicine Program Office of the DoD to utilize telemedicine techniques to support service-member healthcare from enlistment to after-service terms.

Principals

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Hypothesis

The project proposes to explore the feasibility of using telemedicine technology to diagnose, evaluate, and provide clinical consultation for individuals who are suffering from the aftereffects of severe, traumatic stress. It is proposed that video conferencing, combined with online computer assessment instruments, will enhance the delivery of healthcare services to remotely located patient services identified with PTSD.

Research Questions

- A. Can PTSD assessment and diagnosis be effectively conducted using videoconferencing technology and computer on-line assessment instruments?

- B. Can the results of these interventions be effectively utilized through teleconferencing consultations between the PTSD experts and on-site healthcare providers to improve treatment planning and ultimately the treatment of the disorder
- C. How satisfied are the patients and CBOC clinical staff with the use of telemedicine technology for the assessment, diagnosis, treatment, and consultation purposes?

Project Description

The Pacific Islands Division of the National Center for PTSD, Department of VA will conduct a one year demonstration project to determine the feasibility of utilizing telemedicine technology to conduct remote psychological assessment, evaluation and treatment planning consultation.

Videoconferencing and online computer assessment instruments will be employed to assess PTSD in 20 veterans seeking treatment at the Hilo community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC). Additionally, treatment planning and periodic follow-up consultations will be provided to healthcare providers at the CBOC utilizing teleconferencing. Clinical barriers and limitations utilizing telemedicine technology will be addressed and satisfaction questionnaires will be given to all veterans, interviewers and participating CBOC staff.

This project seeks to develop a mental healthcare delivery protocol for distant and remote sites that can be applied by the DoD to guide the development of future programs that will use telepsychiatry techniques to:

1. Provide enhanced mental health services to military personnel including treatment for PTSD and Critical Incident Stress Debriefings
2. Evaluate, diagnose and consult on patients with stress-related disorders
3. Discover new ways to provide mental health services to active duty personnel without the physical presence of a mental health professional
4. Enable modifications in staffing models to maximize the effectiveness of mental health information and staff efficiency

Deliverables and Timeline (All Dates Are Based On A Start Date Of 01 May 99)

04 May – 31 July 1999	Purchase, install and test the video teleconferencing equipment at the Hilo CBOC and upgrade NC-PTSD videoconferencing system. Training of selected CBOC and NC-PTSD staff for operation on either/both systems. Develop Protocols for conducting PTSD assessment interviews, on-line computer testing and treatment planning consultation development.
01 Aug – 31 Sept 1999	Equipment testing and technological troubleshooting. Pilot interviews for identifying potential implementation difficulties in assessment protocols. Conduct training for veteran screening, referral assessments, distressed patient procedures. Refinement of patient and clinical questionnaires.
01 Oct 99 – 29 Feb 2000	Patient referral, telepsychiatric interviews and on-line computer assessments. Teleconference consultations on treatment planning with CBOC will be conducted. Develop questionnaires for level of satisfaction with telemedicine technology.
01 Mar – 30 Apr 2000	Complete remaining treatment consultations. Initiate project evaluation and draft final report. Explore publications and deliverables resulting from project.

Summary

If the feasibility of this proposal is demonstrated on a pilot basis, the procedures could be implemented for use in provision of DOD health care throughout the Pacific. The success of the pilot program and procedures could directly impact and enable agencies such as the VA and the DoD to more appropriately use the technology to provide timely and effective mental healthcare services to patients at remote locations.