

Treating Severely Wounded War Vets

James A. Haley Veterans Affairs Hospital, Chronic Pain Rehabilitation Program, Tampa

This is the largest and most comprehensive pain center in the VA system, according to Michael Clark, Ph.D., clinical director, pain rehabilitation program. It treats veterans from anywhere in the US and



Michael Clark, Ph.D.

specializes in rehabilitative pain management. To face the challenges of treating wounded veterans from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Haley VA recently implemented pain treatment programs for polytrauma victims often accompanied by severe emotional distress.

“We’re treating patients with significant head injuries who are transferred to our Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center (PRC) from military treatment facilities. Many wouldn’t have survived their injuries in Vietnam or the Gulf War,” said Clark. He added that pain assessment and management is challenging in these patients, given the prevalence of cognitive impairment and multiple complex injuries.

To treat returning Iraq and Afghanistan soldiers, Haley recently implemented three innovative programs to provide comprehensive symptomatic and prophylactic treatment to those injured in combat or during deployment. Meanwhile, they developed a pain outcomes instrument now used by more than 800 clinicians and researchers in 36 countries, as well as preliminary validation of actigraphy as an objective pain outcomes measure.

“These patients often come to us on high doses of opioid analgesics, which can interfere with their involvement in rehabilitation. Therefore, we frequently have to intervene with behavioral pain management modalities, including cognitive-behavioral therapy to reduce medication use and start rehabilitation programs to restore functionality,” said Clark. “Most of the PRC patients prefer not taking opioids due to adverse effects, and approximately 55 percent leave totally off opioid pain medications while others leave with substantially reduced dosages. Clark said the average pain reduction during treatment exceeds 50 percent, and current research funding for principal investigators exceeds \$1.4 million.

For the last 17 years, this evidence-based program has systematically collected outcomes data to monitor its success and guide its program development. Within the Veterans Administration (VA) community, Haley’s reputation for excellence has led to its position as a national VA pain treatment referral center and as the premier VA pain resource center. It serves as a model of care, program development and implementation, cost offsets, and resource needs for other VA and non-VA healthcare systems in the United States and abroad. CPRP also provides intensive training to VA pain providers and multidisciplinary treatment teams, and shares its materials on policy, program, treatment, and validated outcomes with other facilities worldwide.

The core pain management team comprises physicians (neurologists, physiatrists, an anesthesiologist, pain fellows, and medical residents), pain psychologists, ARNPs, RNs, LPNs, a registered dietician, and rehabilitation therapists (physical therapists, occupational therapist, kinesiotherapist, vocational therapist, and recreational therapist), and a social worker. Extended team members include a chiropractor, acupuncturist, and pharmacist.

Key members of the CPRP also:

- participate in VA and non-VA national pain advisory groups, committees, and task forces that focus on enhancing pain care
- conduct local, regional, and national education seminars,
- consult with health systems and facilities
- provide training to interdisciplinary pain management teams.

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