The King’s Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) was established in 1996 as the Gulf War Illnesses Research Centre. The Centre comprises of a multidisciplinary team including medical academics, epidemiologists, sociologists and anthropologists. Its initial work was an epidemiological study of the health of the UK Armed Forces investigating so-called Gulf War Syndrome. The study found that whilst military personnel who had served in the 1991 Gulf War were particularly prone to ill-health, their symptoms did not constitute a unique syndrome.

With the onset of hostilities in Iraq in 2003, KCMHR was commissioned by the UK Ministry of Defence to undertake a prospective, longitudinal epidemiological study into the health and wellbeing of the forces destined for Iraq and Afghanistan. This is now KCMHR’s flagship study and has collected data from around 16,000 military personnel soldiers; its third wave of data collection is due to begin later this year.

KCMHR is led by Professor Sir Simon Wessely, a psychiatrist, and his co-directors Professor Christopher Dandeker, a military sociologist and Dr Nicola Fear, an epidemiologist. KCMHR’s cross-disciplinary approach may be unique; certainly no other such institution exists in the UK. The team has published around 300 or so research papers covering a diverse range of topics. The Centre’s historian, Professor Edgar Jones, leads a very popular MSc in War and Psychiatry.

Although KCMHR receives considerable MoD funding, as well as grants from other funders including the MRC and ESRC, it remains wholly academically independent and has fostered a reputation as a trusted source for the military, charities, politicians and the media.

Much of the Centre’s research output is of direct relevance to Defence policy. For instance, whilst the public perception is that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is common in the forces, the facts are that the proportion of returning soldiers who suffer from PTSD (~4%) is only marginally greater than the general population (~3%). Whilst KCMHR has found that certain groups are more likely to suffer with PTSD (such as reservists (~5%) and combat troops (~7%)) there is no evidence as yet of tidal waves, ticking time bombs or tsunamis as the media would have the British public believe. These findings contrast with those from the USA, which has higher rates of PTSD in Veterans and where, unlike the UK, the rates seem to be getting worse over time. Data sharing initiatives between US institutions and KCMHR, currently underway, should help explain disparities between the two nations.

Another important facet of KCMHR’s work concerns public communication. The Centre aims to both dispel myths about the Armed Forces and focus attention on neglected areas of need. For example, those who leave service after less than four years are more likely to suffer with poor mental health and alcohol problems; probably for reasons not solely related to their service.

KCMHR is also carrying out the first ever randomised trial of mental health screening in the military. Despite screening being used by many of our partner nations, no quality evidence exists to inform whether or not it might be useful, harmful or just a waste of precious resource.

Another myth is that PTSD is the biggest threat to military health – in fact it is alcohol misuse. KCMHR research has shown that both male and female soldiers are twice as likely to binge drink as the general population.

Another area of potential risk is the increasing reliance upon reservists. Reservists have been shown to be more psychologically vulnerable than regulars and report having less support on return home and feel substantially less part of the military establishment than Regulars.

Whilst KCMHR’s researchers do not always have the answers to the problems they identify, such solutions rely on military leaders and policy makers. Without the research output of the Centre, the UK government would be ‘flying blind’ in what is a complex and politically sensitive area.

If you would like further information please contact:

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