Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

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Research into veterans' substance misuse

Reasons why veterans with substance misuse have difficulty in seeking and engaging with help have been identified in new research by Northumbria University, Newcastle.

Funded by the Royal British Legion, the research shows that for those veterans who took part in the study, excessive alcohol consumption was the norm during their service career and that they did not recognise it as an issue or accept that their alcohol consumption was excessive. This perception, and their relationship with alcohol, resulted in the veterans delaying their engagement with meaningful help and support by which time, and in all cases, the veterans had very complex issues.

The 18 month research project, carried out by The Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families' Research at Northumbria, found that it took on average 18 years for a veteran with substance misuse (primarily alcohol related) to engage with meaningful help. In all cases in the study this was not just alcohol in isolation and only when they had serious and multiple issues such as mental or physical health and/or social problems. Three quarters of those in the study who sought support only did so when they became homeless and 15% when going through the criminal justice system.

The research involved interviewing 31 British veterans, including 20 who had alcohol issues and six senior health and social care commissioners based in the North East.

Dr Matt Kiernan, a lecturer at Northumbria University and a former Lieutenant Commander in the Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service, led the research. He said: "Heavy drinking was reported as a large part of normal life in the forces by those involved in this research. Only when they left did they realise that this was not the case in society as a whole. During the interviews we did find that when veterans encountered services who do have knowledge and understanding of their issues they are more likely to open up and confront their problem.

"We are hoping that this research will help those involved in providing support and care to veteran's to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers veterans face when engaging with care, and encourage collaboration to provide a much more holistic pathway of care to address veterans' needs."

The key findings of the research are being presented to a range of organisations involved in supporting veterans at an event in Gateshead on Friday 31 March. It is hoped that the event will focus on how services can be more responsive to the needs of veterans and lead to the creation of an integrated health and social care pathway for veterans with substance misuse problems. Attendees include the NHS, Clinical Commissioning Groups, Local Authorities, the Ministry of Defence, the Royal British Legion and charities, as well as a number of veterans.

Sergeant Major Stuart Wicks served for the Royal Corps of Transport between 1967 and 1992. He toured in Germany, Northern Ireland and during the aftermath of the Falklands. He said: "Drinking was part of the job for me. I was 14 years my second career as a police officer before I realised I had a

problem with drink. If you were someone who didn't drink then you wouldn't fit into the army culture.

"When the stress started to take its toll I then started drinking. I drank whenever I was off. I would drink until I passed out basically. My first marriage fell apart mainly because of alcohol and as I went through the police service, the police identified that I did need some help around my mental health and also alcohol as well. I think that there should be an Armed Services Rehabilitation Act. A transition period for people coming out the services needs to be put in place.

Stuart, who has been abstinent for five years, now works for the North East-based national charity Changing Lives as an outreach worker for veterans in the Newcastle and Gateshead areas. Stuart and colleagues at Changing Lives helped researchers recruit veterans for the project.

Chief Executive of Changing Lives, Stephen Bell, said: "We help some of the most poor and vulnerable members of society and it is a pity - but no real surprise when you look at the research - to find so many veterans accessing our homelessness services.

"We are pleased that Stuart took part in the research and proud that he wants to help others and raise awareness of the issues and repercussions surrounding alcohol and the armed forces."

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