

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Literature review of available research on veterans' needs in aged care

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Research overview

This research was undertaken to identify and synthesise existing research on older veterans, and their families' experiences and needs in aged care. The project was commissioned to inform any future improvements to the way aged care is delivered to veterans and to identify gaps in understanding of the needs of older veterans and their families in aged care settings.

A structured search of major research databases was conducted to produce a landscape overview of the available research. Key research questions addressed the needs and experiences of veterans and their families in aged care and comparisons of needs to those who did not serve. Included articles focused on original research specific to veterans' needs. There was a particular focus placed on the issues of dementia and other cognitive decline in veterans, the effects of trauma and PTSD in later life, and elder abuse.

The studies identified were focused on veteran experiences in a range of countries including a minority specifically about Australian veteran experiences. Several opportunities for improving veteran outcomes were identified, with a strong emphasis on awareness of trauma and military/veteran culture and the way that military service impacts on these experiences. Limitations of the review include that only a relatively small amount of research on the experiences of older veterans was found.

Results

The literature review found that older veterans have a higher prevalence or risk of diagnosed physical and mental health conditions than comparable non-veterans (e.g. PTSD/PTSS, Dementia, chronic illnesses, cardiovascular diseases, hearing loss). It found that social connections have positive effects in relation to self-perception of subjective age and potentially reduced the risk of suicidal ideation. It found that management of veterans' care in aged care settings can be improved through training on trauma informed practice and a better understanding of military culture. DVA-supported clients access more home care services than similar non-DVA clients, and the DVA Community Nursing program assists people to remain in their homes longer. The literature review findings highlighted that PTSD has a range of effects on veterans as they get older, including an increased risk for suicide; increased risk of cognitive decline and dementia; and is associated with vascular and cardiovascular diseases. Military experiences, particularly combat and captivity, as well as general service, can impact physical and cognitive health in later life. There is also some evidence that partners of veterans with military related trauma are more likely to experience trauma symptoms themselves.

The researchers suggest there are several gaps in existing research, including:

- Abuse and/or mistreatment of older veterans (elder abuse)
- Needs and experiences of family members (their own aged care needs or those of a carer)
- Experience in aged care (residential/in-home)
- End of life care needs
- Australian veterans/civilian comparisons
- Management of suicide risk among older veterans

Key messages

- The review synthesised existing research relating to the effect ADF service has had on veterans as they age.
- Limited studies were available, particularly Australian studies.
- The findings highlighted some of the opportunities to improve care outcomes for veterans in aged care settings: social connections, family involvement and improving skills of workers in trauma-informed care and understanding military culture.
- Additionally cognitive rehabilitation training programs improved executive function and emotional regulation among veterans with Traumatic Brain Injuries.
- Some mental health conditions are linked to an increased risk of cognitive decline and dementia.
- DVA clients access more home support services than non-clients.
- The project highlighted there is limited research available on elder abuse, end of life care, experiences of veterans and families in aged care or comparisons of experiences between veterans and non-veterans.