War Syndromes and Their Evaluation: From the U.S. Civil War to the Persian Gulf War

Abstract

Purpose: To better understand the health problems of veterans of the Persian Gulf War by analyzing previous war-related illnesses and identifying possible unifying factors.

Data Source: English-language articles and books on war-related illnesses published since 1863 that were located primarily through a manual search of bibliographies.

Data Extraction: Publications were assessed for information on the clinical characteristics of war-related illnesses and the research methods used to evaluate such illnesses.

Data Synthesis: Poorly understood war syndromes have been associated with armed conflicts at least since the U.S. Civil War. Although these syndromes have been characterized by similar symptoms (fatigue, shortness of breath, headache, sleep disturbance, forgetfulness, and impaired concentration), no single recurring illness that is unrelated to psychological stress is apparent. However, many types of illness were found among evaluated veterans, including well-defined medical and psychiatric conditions, acute combat stress reaction, post-traumatic stress disorder, and possibly the chronic fatigue syndrome. No single disease is apparent, but one unifying factor stands out: A unique population was intensely scrutinized after experiencing an exceptional, life-threatening set of exposures. As a result, research efforts to date have been unable to conclusively show causality, have been subject to reporting bias, and have lacked similar control populations. In addition to research limitations, war syndromes have involved fundamental, unanswered questions about the importance of chronic somatic symptoms and the factors that create a personal sense of ill health.

Conclusion: Until we can better understand what constitutes health and illness in all adult populations, we risk repeated occurrences of unexplained symptoms among veterans after each war.
Gulf War syndrome (GWS), sometimes known as Gulf War illnesses (GWI), is claimed as a medical condition with a wide variety of symptoms apparently contracted by people who were in the area of Kuwait around the 1990-1991 Gulf War, the one where George H. W. Bush and multinational armed forces (the "Coalition") kicked Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait in a short military operation, before stopping at the borders of Iraq. A number of causes connected to the war have been advanced, although there is no certain...