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Navy Medicine Researchers Develop Targeted Research Agenda for Health of Service Women

KISSIMMEE, Florida – During the first ever breakout session to focus on women’s health at the Military Health System Research Symposium (MHSRS), Aug. 15, scientists from Navy Medicine’s research and development enterprise discussed developing a focused agenda for future research on the health of U.S. service women.

In the past few decades, the number of female service members on active duty has dramatically increased. Recent guidance from the Department of Defense has opened all military occupational specialties to qualified service members, regardless of gender. It is important that current research reflects these demographic shifts and is able to inform health policies of the future.

During the breakout session, Cmdr. Abigail Marter Yablonsky, a Navy nurse researcher from the Naval Health Research Center (NHRC), one of the eight labs that are part of Navy Medicine’s research enterprise, discussed current work to evaluate the existing peer-reviewed literature. This work aims to identify trends in health concerns and compare these findings with recent data on the health care utilization of female service members, identifying significant research gaps that will inform future studies.

“Our goal was to examine all published, peer-reviewed articles on the health of U.S. service members that contained gender-specific findings from January 2000 to September 2015,” said Yablonsky. “We started off looking at 14,999 unique articles, and using specific inclusion and exclusion criteria, ended up with a total of 979 articles appropriate to our analysis.”

According to Yablonsky, the research team developed an innovative quality indicator instrument to evaluate each of the 979 articles. The new quality checklist was able to assess six different dimensions of quality using objective criteria and was applicable across a wide spectrum of research designs. This provides researchers with another metric to use when they are looking at published evidence; articles that have higher quality scores are more likely to reflect high quality research.

Due to the broad scope of the project, which examined articles across many scientific disciplines and across widely disparate topics, researchers determined that a traditional systematic literature review was not appropriate. Instead, they conducted what is known as a scoping review that provides a structure for the review of large bodies of diverse literature.





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After initiating the literature review, the research team categorized their findings into topics and subtopics to reflect the research that had already been done on the health of military service women. The major topics that were the focus of past research were injury, readiness, deployment health, psychological health, social relationships, acute care and preventive medicine, chronic illness, and obstetrical and gynecological health.

“Our next steps include mapping each of the identified topics and subtopics with article quality data as well as health utilization data from military medical databases. In this way, we can determine what areas may need to be further investigated with more rigorous research, and identify areas that research has essentially not explored,” said Yablonsky. “This will enable us to develop a targeted agenda to guide future health studies that will improve the health, well-being, and readiness of our active duty service members.”

Capt. Jacqueline Rychnovsky, commanding officer at the Naval Medical Research Center and the originator of this research protocol, attended the presentation.

"I am very proud of the work that is being done at NHRC in this very important field of research," said Rychnovsky. "We need to be proactive and visionary in our efforts to sustain and improve the health of female service members."

Navy Medicine's research and development laboratories engage in a broad spectrum of activity from basic laboratory science to field studies at sites in remote areas of the world and operational environments. Research topics include infectious diseases; biological warfare detection and defense; combat casualty care; environment health concerns; bone marrow research and registry; aerospace and undersea medicine; medical modeling, simulation and operational mission support; and epidemiology and behavioral sciences. Our capabilities and global reach reflect the broad mission of Navy Medicine's Research and Development Enterprise.

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