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## **Women with PTSD sought for Veterans Affairs study**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is recruiting up to 384 women with current or past military experience and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to test two kinds of psychotherapy for the condition. The study, being conducted through 2005 at one Army hospital and 10 VA medical centers nationwide is the largest clinical trial ever on psychotherapy for PTSD.

PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that affects more than 5 million Americans during the course of a year, and some 30 percent of war veterans. Women are at twice the risk for the condition. It occurs after the experiencing or witnessing of a life-threatening or frightening event, such as a violent assault, natural disaster or military combat. Symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety, and relationship difficulties. The disorder is often tied in with other physical and mental health problems.

The VA study is comparing two types of cognitive behavioral therapy: prolonged exposure therapy, in which patients repeatedly relive the frightening experience under controlled conditions, to help them work through the trauma; and present-centered therapy, which provides emotional support and helps patients cope with current problems. Prior research has yielded promising results for both treatments, especially exposure therapy. In addition to psychotherapy, some drugs, such as antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications, have been shown to help PTSD.

According to study co-chair Paula Schnurr, PhD, the study is extremely timely due to the ongoing war in Iraq and the numbers of women serving there. About 216,000 women are currently on active duty, with another 151,000 in the Reserves and National Guard.

Approximately 20-25% of women who served in the Vietnam War and Gulf War developed PTSD. We'd expect the figures for women serving in Iraq to be at least as high," said Schnurr, deputy executive director of VA's National Center for PTSD, in White River Junction, Vt., where the study is headquartered.

Schnurr pointed out that the \$5 million study is the first multi-site VA clinical trial to focus exclusively on women. Women are increasingly seeking VA health care, and PTSD is recognized as a significant problem among women veterans. According to Schnurr, not only do many women experience trauma during their military service—some studies show that as many as 40 or 50 percent of active-duty women are sexually assaulted—but

many service women have experienced sexual assault, family abuse or other trauma prior to enlisting.

Women interested in participating in the study should call **(802) 291-6225** or email at **csp494@nimbus.dartmouth.edu** for further information. Eligible women will receive 10 weeks of free psychotherapy from a trained female therapist and take part in interviews several times during the study.

Participating study sites include the VA medical centers in Albuquerque, Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, New Orleans and Portland; and Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC, where active-duty women are being seen. The study is funded jointly by VA and the Department of Defense.

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