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Study shows free Veteran Friendly GP Practices scheme leads to more effective care

The Royal College of GPs and NHS England are encouraging GP practices to become 'Veteran Friendly Accredited' after a new evaluation by the University of Chester revealed that it leads to better healthcare for veterans and is recommended by 99% of practice staff.

The study follows a warning from a mental health charity for veterans that media coverage surrounding the invasion of Ukraine could 're-traumatise' some veterans and trigger difficult thoughts and feelings¹.

Martin Marshall, Chair of the RCGP, commented: "We know that when war and conflict is so prominent, it can trigger episodes of anxiety and PTSD for ex-military personnel and their families. On average, most practices will see a veteran patient every day and this free and quick-to-implement programme is set up to make it easier to identify, support and refer any patients that might be struggling at this challenging time. We know that the scars of conflict are not always visible and that's why it's so important to have a process that makes it easier for veterans to access help - this new research demonstrates the scheme's effectiveness."

It is thought that up to 30% of veterans may experience PTSD² and more than half (52%) may have a long-term illness, disability or infirmity³, yet studies suggest that veterans are less likely to seek help if they feel their healthcare professional might not understand³.

Data from the University of Chester's study of 225 accredited practices revealed that 84% now have a better understanding of how to meet veterans' health needs and 72% believed that the programme had already benefited their veteran patients. Some practices reported an increase in veteran registrations since becoming accredited and 99% of practices said they would recommend the accreditation scheme to others.

More than 1,200 GP practices have already signed up to the Veteran Friendly Accreditation Scheme, which is designed with busy practice teams in mind and includes an easy process for coding veteran patients and access to information on how to support and refer veterans to specialist services.

Dr Robin Simpson, RCGP Clinical Champion, said: "There has never been a more important time for practices to become Veteran Friendly Accredited. The situation in Ukraine has increased the need some veterans will have for support, while the Government's new Veterans Strategy Action Plan⁴ commits to making the UK 'the best place in the world to be a veteran by 2028'. This scheme, which is designed to support busy practices, provides a good opportunity for any practice-based clinician to take a leadership role in an area that has been recognised as a national priority and that is now more needed than ever."

Principle Investigator for the evaluation was Professor Alan Finnegan, Professor of Nursing and Military Mental Health at University of Chester, said: "This independent evaluation has demonstrated very encouraging results for the GP Veteran Friendly Accredited Practices Programme, with many positive outcomes. It was very clear from the results and our conversations that veterans appear to receive better healthcare when GPs, nurses and other primary healthcare staff understand their needs. We found that the programme, which leads to improved knowledge of veteran specific secondary and tertiary services and of the priority referral pathway, is beneficial to veterans and their families."

The evaluation report included comments from a number of clinicians from practices that have been accredited.

A clinician from one practice that took part in the evaluation commented: “When we first got registered and told the staff what we were doing, there was huge support from the staff, particularly the admin team. They were really positive and quite a few of them have got spouses who are ex-military or children in the military so they’re right behind it. It has raised the profile of military awareness. We have a real sense of pride in the staff which wasn’t there before, from supporting the military.”

Another said: “As a practice, we are now more aware of the specific issues that involve patients who are veterans so I think that makes us more responsive to their needs.”

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Find out more about the programme and fill in a simple form for more information:

<https://www.rcgp.org.uk/veterans>

Ends

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References

¹ [Combat Stress - Ukraine invasion \(2022\)](#)

² [King’s College London, The evolution of post-traumatic stress disorder in the UK Armed Forces: traumatic exposures in Iraq and Afghanistan and responses of distress \(TRIAD study\). January 2021](#)

³ [Robin G Simpson, J Leach. UK military veteran-friendly GP practices. British Medical Journal Military Health. Volume 168, issue 1. February 2021](#)

⁴ [Cabinet Office, Office for Veteran Affairs and Veterans UK. Veteran Strategy Action Plan: 2022-2024. 19th January 2022](#)

About the RCGPs Veteran Friendly Practice Accreditation Programme

- The Veteran Friendly GP Practice accreditation scheme supports practices to deliver the best possible care and treatment for patients who have served in the armed forces.
- The scheme helps GP practices to identify, code and support their veteran patients, which is important as the healthcare needs of veterans can be different to the general population.
- Accredited practices appoint a clinical lead who receives training and support, and receive an information pack to help increase their understanding of the health needs of veterans, and the services available to them.
- Accreditation is voluntary and fulfils key commitments of the NHS Long Term Plan: ‘To ensure all GPs in England are equipped to best serve our veterans and their families.’
- The accreditation scheme has been developed by RCGP in partnership with NHS England and NHS Improvement.
- Over 1,000 GP practices are now accredited through the programme.

Support for veterans struggling with their mental health

Op COURAGE: The Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Service provides dedicated mental health care and support to service leavers, reservists, veterans and their families.

Individuals can contact the service to make an appointment or ask someone to do this on their behalf. It doesn't matter how long ago someone left the Armed Forces, help is available. For more information, visit www.nhs.uk/opcourage