Center for the Intrepid: Five Years of Changing Lives

Patients remain at the center for several months, or until they reach their maximum potential and are outfitted with their final prosthesis.

This year, the Army’s Center for the Intrepid at Brooke Army Medical Center, San Antonio, celebrated its fifth year serving casualties of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the first year alone, the center accommodated more than 28,000 patient visits. Nowadays, the staff routinely manages upward of 650 patient visits per week.

The center’s primary focus has been on providing rehabilitation for casualties who have sustained amputation, burns or loss of limb function. The staff has also made remarkable strides in educating the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs on the newest treatments and promoting research that will ultimately change life for generations of injured service members.

For example, many of the injured want nothing more than to return to their units on the front lines of the fight. While
some injuries require more intensive treatment and rehabilitation, the center’s staff has managed to help accommodate that wish for a number of patients.

“The Center for the Intrepid shares a common goal with DAV,” said National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson. “We want our injured service members and veterans to regain a sense of normalcy in their lives. The center has helped put these men and women on the path to maximize their potential for emotional, mental and physical recovery. DAV applauds the fine work of the center’s staff, but moreover the determination of the patients who dedicate themselves to healing.”

**Returning the Injured to Duty**

Injuries which years ago might have sidelined, if not outright ended, a military career are diminishing with technology fielded at the center. There are roughly 5,300 limb-salvage patients from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, exceeding the number of lower-extremity amputations by about five times.

But orthotic devices like the Intrepid Dynamic Exoskeletal Orthosis (IDEO) make pain-free walking, running, parachuting and even returning to combat entirely feasible for some patients. The custom-fit device is made of carbon and fiberglass and mimics an amputee’s running prosthetic, enabling the foot and ankle to perform despite compromised bone structure or muscle loss. Not only does it help save some from limb amputation, it also keeps many valuable and experienced service members on active duty.

“Without the drive and efforts of so many wounded warriors who utilize the IDEO and overcome limitations of their injuries, there would be no reason for any acknowledgement of this program and the IDEO,” said center prosthetist Ryan Blanck, the device “They are the real heroes in all of this.”

Of the more than 240 service members who have been outfitted with the IDEO since its 2009 introduction, more than 30 have
returned to duty, and 11 have combat deployed. Currently, high demand for limited resources means those patients medically retired from their injuries may not be able to receive them. The IDEO is now under a provisional patent phase, which could give the device more widespread potential.

**Total Rehabilitation**

The center is absolutely dedicated to healing injured service members, with a staff and facilities that reflect the intention to help them return to normalcy in life and work. It is equipped with an indoor running track, a prosthetic fabrication lab and a natatorium as well as a firing range and military performance lab.

Here, patients learn how to adapt to everyday functions like walking and driving, but also how to adjust a prosthetic device to perform more complex tasks like firing a rifle, climbing a rock wall and navigating unstable terrain.

The center is also home to the CAREN 3-D virtual reality simulator, the first of its kind in the world. Patients stand on a treadmill beneath CAREN’s 21-foot dome, surrounded by a 300-degree screen. The simulator immerses patients in various virtual and physical worlds, adjusting the platform and treadmill to the computer-driven scenario changes. Patients may be taken on a hike over hilly trails, down a busy city street or on a boat in choppy waters.

Through several months of physical and occupational therapy, patients reach their maximum potential. According to center staff, this lasts several months or until they get their final prosthesis. As with IDEO patients, the overall number of amputees able to return to service is low, fewer than 50. But armed with unparalleled equipment and technology, the center makes every effort.

“Our feeling is that we’ve invested so much time in their training, if a soldier wants to stay on active duty, we should
do what we can to give them that ability,” said the center’s first director, Col. Mark Bagg (Ret.).

Looking to the Future

Currently, the center serves amputees and burn patients injured in Iraq or Afghanistan, with ultimate plans to expand operations to encompass veterans, retirees and family members.

“The Center for the Intrepid is a representation of the kind of advanced, quality facility that our military members and veteran patients deserve,” said Wilson. “Investment in this facility has yielded tremendous things for our injured service men and women, and we look forward to the center’s long-term vision of bringing more injured veterans into the fold.”

More than 600,000 American individuals and organizations contributed to construction of the center. During fundraising efforts, the DAV Charitable Service Trust awarded a $750,000 grant in 2006 toward the $50 million cost of the 65,000-square foot, state-of-the-art facility.

As the country moves closer to an end to the war in Afghanistan, rehabilitation for the wounded will last for years to come, making the center a vital facet in the recovery process for generations of American veterans.