

ISSUE BRIEF: TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY

There is a great need to improve screening, diagnosis and treatment for mild-to-moderate traumatic brain injury, a prevalent injury among Iraq/Afghanistan veterans.

The Situation

- Traumatic brain injury (TBI), a very common injury to veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, can cause devastating and often permanent damage to brain tissue. Even mild-to-moderate TBI, much harder to diagnose, can lead to lasting physical and psychological problems.
- Many OEF/OIF veterans have suffered “mild,” but pathologically significant, brain injuries that have gone undiagnosed and largely untreated. Behavioral problems, memory loss, disruptive acts, depression and substance-use disorder are symptoms associated with TBI.
- According to a 2008 RAND study, 19 percent of returning OEF/OIF servicemembers report possible TBI. RAND estimated that over 300,000 servicemembers had experienced TBI, but only 44% of them have been evaluated by a physician.

The Challenge

- The Department of Defense still lacks a system-wide approach for identification, management, and surveillance of individuals who sustain mild-to-moderate TBI in combat.
- VA programs addressing the needs of servicemembers with mild-to-moderate TBI have not been fully developed or implemented.
- Veterans with TBI often have difficulty communicating their health status or seeking proper assistance. Complicating this situation, many rural veterans are unable or unwilling to overcome the barrier of distance to reach the nearest VA medical center.

The Solution

- Proper screening and personalized recovery plans are essential to detect and treat TBI, particularly for those cases that are mild to moderate in severity.
- An increase in DoD and VA specialists with TBI expertise is needed to assist in identifying and managing the complex conditions prevalent in this population.
- More research is necessary to understand the long term consequences of TBI, as well as the development of best practices in treating these injuries. These studies should also focus on older veterans who may have suffered these injuries in earlier wars, to detect mild-to-moderate cases of TBI and study their consequences.