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The Greatest Casualty

Sally Breen experienced the effects of the poorly managed Veteran Affairs medical system first hand when her father-in-law Thomas found blood in his urine. Breen called Veterans Affairs to schedule an appointment, claiming that it was urgent. In response, she was told, “It's a seven-month waiting list. And you're gonna have to have patience.” She continued to call for weeks as her father-in-law continued to regress. When Veterans Affairs finally called back with an opening, Thomas Breen had already died of, as it turned out, Stage Four bladder cancer (Bronstein).

Thomas Breen was one of many who suffered from a staggeringly long waiting period. Veterans who are in dire need of care are written off and told simply to wait, even under the most critical of circumstances.

This type of problem has unfortunately increased in recent years, ever since President George W. Bush sent American soldiers to fight in Iraq in response to the terrorist act that took place on September 11th in 2001. The military operations that took place - known as Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn – caused injury and death to thousands of young American soldiers. Advanced military technology and new methods of combat resulted in a multitude of both physical and mental problems for the soldiers returning from the warfront.

Returning Afghanistan and Iraq veterans faced unexpected obstacles upon returning home from service. Maintaining healthy family relationships and successfully assimilating back into society, for example, are common difficulties faced by returning veterans both young and old. An unexpected obstacle that arose in recent months was veterans' inability to obtain proper health care when they returned from service.

In April of 2014, it came to light that there was a major problem concerning the Veterans Affairs health care system. Under the control of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki, dozens of veterans who were enrolled in the VA system died before they got the chance to be treated (Michael). The families of the veterans who passed away indignantly stepped forward, claiming that their veteran's death was caused by the long waiting period required to see a VA physician (Bronstein).

This Veterans Affairs health care scandal shocked the nation as more and more cases like Breen's came to light. Over 700 Veterans Affairs hospitals were placed under review. It was discovered that in addition to over 57,000 veterans being forced to wait over ninety days to see a physician, over 63,000 veterans never saw doctors even after making an appointment (Martinez).

In response to discovering the flaws in the health care system, Congress took immediate action to try to resolve the situation. Shortly after Secretary Eric Shinseki resigned from his position, the Senate approved board reforms by a vote of 93 to 3 (Barrett). Obama signed the Veterans' Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014, otherwise known as H.R. 3230, into law (Brenchley). This act authorized the use of \$500 million to hire doctors and nurses to work in one of the 26 new Veterans Affairs medical centers (Barrett). This bill also makes firing executive employees easier, a provision that would have been useful at the start of the medical care scandal.

After signing the new Veterans' Act of 2014, Obama addressed the veterans, saying, "You've risked your lives on multiple tours to defend our nation. And as a country, we have a sacred obligation to serve you as well as you've served us" (Brenchley).

Obama promised the veterans that changes would occur regarding the structure of Veterans Affairs and, by extension, the medical care system.

These actions, however, are simply not enough. Veterans need more than just a guarantee that they will be able to see a doctor in less than 90 days. These returning soldiers have long-term problems that must be dealt with. The government's proposal to restructure Veterans Affairs is, while a step in the right direction, a solution to a short-term problem.

The majority of the effort on behalf of the veterans has been on reforming Veterans Affairs, which is currently experiencing an overhaul under the command of President Barack Obama. More, however, needs to be done to ensure the long-term well-being of the veterans. In order to guarantee the well-being of America's veterans, the

government needs to ensure that returning Iraq and Afghanistan soldiers are getting the help they need to maintain their mental health as individuals.

Today's Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were faced with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), land mines, and rocket-propelled grenades. The increased use of these weapons in combat zones resulted in increased cases of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) amongst soldiers (Bagalman). PTSD and TBI are being called the "signature wound" amongst this era of veterans as the amount of soldiers being diagnosed has increased dramatically since 2001 (Bagalman).

Although Traumatic Brain Injury has multiple causes, it is most commonly due to exposure to blasts in war ("TBI Statistics"). According to the Shepherd Center, TBI can range anywhere from a mild concussion to an extended period of unconsciousness resulting in amnesia ("Shepherd Center"). Approximately 320,000 soldiers in the United States have been diagnosed with a TBI related problem in the past decade. TBI affects between 10-and-20% of all soldiers who served in Iraq or Afghanistan, and it has been linked to certain psychiatric disorders – most notably Post Traumatic Stress Disorder ("TBI Statistics").

PTSD has affected an estimated 400,000 soldiers in the past decade, and is the leading mental illness affecting veterans who have returned from service ("Who We Serve"). One out of every three soldiers who served in Iraq or Afghanistan struggles with PTSD, according to a study in the Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research journal. This number exceeds those affected by PTSD who served in the Vietnam War ("Who We Serve").

Veterans returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are extremely young; many are under 25 years of age. This unfortunately means that there is an increased risk for being diagnosed with PTSD. In a study by Donna Sabella, it was proven that returning veterans who are around 25 years of age have been proven to be more susceptible to PTSD and mental health disorders than active duty veterans who are forty years old or older (Sabella).

PTSD can fortunately be cured under the proper treatment. Psychological treatments, such as Cognitive Processing Therapy and Prolonged Exposure Therapy, are the two most effective treatments for patients experiencing PTSD (Rosenberg). Cognitive Processing Therapy teaches patients to think about an experience in a different way. Prolonged Exposure Therapy trains the brain to process the triggering event differently. Both treatments have proven to be successful in curing veterans of PTSD 40% of the time (Rosenberg). However, there are persisting problems regarding the treatment of this mental disorder – particularly accessibility.

According to the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, in fiscal year 2011, over 475,000 veterans were diagnosed with PTSD and received treatment at Veterans Affairs clinics and medical centers. In addition, it was made mandatory for all new members of the VA medical system to be screened for PTSD (Rosenberg). These are positive actions, certainly. The issue, however, lies in the fact that actual one-on-one treatments and medical counseling sessions are simply not available to all veterans. There are far too many veterans plagued with PTSD than there are psychotherapists to treat them in the Veterans Affairs health care system (Rosenberg).

In a study done by Brian Shiner in 2012, it was discovered that 42% of OEF and OIF veterans diagnosed with PTSD did not reach out to Veterans Affairs for treatment or counseling services (Shiner). There are many potential reasons for this. Veterans may not have realized they needed treatment, or may have just sought out care outside of the Veterans Affairs medical system. Whatever the reason, this is an unacceptable number of veterans who are still struggling with their PTSD.

Even the soldiers who did seek help through the Veterans Affairs health care system were not given proper assistance. Approximately 9.5% of all OEF or OIF veterans diagnosed with PTSD visited the VA counseling service enough times to receive effective treatment (Seal). That means that less than one out of every ten veterans diagnosed with PTSD actually received long-term care through the help of VA (Seal).

These counseling services are the key to achieving long-term stability and mental health, and yet veterans are not using the services to their full advantage because they are not as accessible or as mandatory as they should be. If the government were truly making veterans a national priority, they would make mental health counseling mandatory for returning veterans.

PTSD also puts great strain on the domestic life of returning war veterans. In a study done by Jennifer Price and Susan Stevens, it was found that veterans diagnosed with PTSD experience problems parenting their children and poorer relationships with their spouses upon their return from service than veterans without PTSD (Price). Divorce is twice more likely for soldiers with PTSD, and there is also a correlation with increased amounts of domestic violence (Price).

The issues that veterans face domestically due to PTSD (and, to a lesser extent, TBI) make the need for accessible counseling and therapy even more urgent. Government and community support needs to be made available for veterans locally so that they can ensure a smoother transition back into domestic life after service. Soldiers face enough problems on the warfront; they shouldn't have to deal with problems at home simply because they are not receiving the attention or services that they need.

The United States government has already addressed that their lack of attention towards returning soldiers is shameful and needs to change. They took steps to restructure the internal workings of Veterans Affairs under the direction of President Obama. What needs to be guaranteed now is that under this new and improved Veterans Affairs, veterans will receive services and treatment that will undoubtedly provide them with proper care to ensure their long-term well-being.

Some might argue against taking drastic efforts to fix the veterans' current issues. Many would argue that when veterans return home, they should be treated like any other United States citizen would be treated. They are, after all, no longer soldiers when they are back in the states, and should be able to find a job, get an education, and manage their own health care issues without the need for government intervention just like anyone else.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has been in place for hundreds of years. It could be argued that the department only needs improvement, which it is receiving thanks to Obama's move for restructuring. However, mere improvement in the system is not enough. Veterans need more care and assistance than any other citizen, and they should especially not be treated worse than an average citizen in regards to medical care.

The Veterans Affairs system is broken; it is overloaded and unable to take care of veterans' needs. Especially with the recent influx of young Iraq and Afghanistan veterans returning home with PTSD and TBI, there needs to be a much more conscious and drastic effort to reform their situations and ensure veterans' well-beings.

In order to solve the veteran's problems completely, the Veterans Affairs medical system should be disbanded. It is causing more harm than good to the waiting and suffering veterans of this country.

The government should take the doctors and nurses that currently work in the Veterans Affairs hospitals and put them into the United States' national medical care system. The money that is dedicated to fixing Veterans Affairs should then be used instead to pay for veterans' insurance in private care facilities.

If veterans had access to the private sector the nation's medical system and were guaranteed that the government would pay their insurance, this would be a big step in resolving the health care crisis that is currently plaguing veterans. Veterans would be treated more quickly and efficiently than they are currently being treated in the VA system, and they would be able to work on treating PTSD and TBI in the long-term with the help of the government-paid insurance.

Wounded Warrior Project is an organization that provides assistance to those who incurred a physical or mental injury on September 11th, 2001, or any day of service following ("Who We Serve"). This organization's tagline reads, "The greatest casualty is being forgotten", something that this country needs to remember ("Who We Serve"). It is crucial that the veterans of this nation are not forgotten. Whether a veteran served in Vietnam or Korea, or more recently in the Iraq or Afghanistan wars, he or she needs to be

cared for. It is out of respect and honor that the United States serves their veterans and ensures their well-being once returned home from service, and as a nation we must serve them as they have served us. We cannot let our survivors and protectors become the casualties of the wars they returned from.

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