

A ‘Big Step Forward’ for Gulf War Veterans

Gulf War Illness (GWI) is now officially recognized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 30 years after symptoms began

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On Oct . 1, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) approved an official diagnostic code for Gulf War Illness (GWI) more than 30 years after symptoms of the condition began to be reported.

The illness, which is described as an amalgamation of several chronic symptoms including fatigue, respiratory issues, joint pain and gastrointestinal pains, has been historically dismissed by doctors and physicians as psychological.

In an article posted by the Boston University School of Public Health, Denise Nichols, a Gulf War veteran and veteran advocate, said the implementation of the code has been a “big step forward for medicine, research and the health of our military community.”

With an established diagnostic code, patients with GWI can be easily found through medical search records, as opposed to being found through less efficient methods, such as social media.

The code also will allow for faster, more intensive research into the condition, better monitoring of symptoms and better tracking of effective treatments.

VFW Director of National Veteran Services Michael Figlioli claims that VFW Gulf War veterans will benefit greatly from this new diagnostic code.

“The CDC recognizing Gulf War Illness in a formal manner is significant for a number of reasons,” Figlioli said. “First off, there is validation that this is not ‘made up,’ or it’s ‘no such thing.’ It also provides for evidence-based care and not anecdotal treatment, better overall symptom management and finally, it will help substantiate veterans’ claims for benefits

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from the VA, leading to an overall better quality of life.”

It is believed that the condition affected as many as one-third of the 700,000 troops who were deployed in the Persian Gulf War between 1990 and 1991.

THE PUSH FOR MORE ANSWERS

The demolition of a chemical weapons depot in 1991 in the Khamisiyah region in southern Iraq is believed to have been a cause of GWI for more than 100,000 troops.

According to an article written by Linda Hersey for Stars and Stripes, inquiries into the demolition were “revived” when a group of veterans began to push for the declassification of tens of thousands of documents that could be detrimental to the research of GWI and chemical exposure during the war.

Ronald Brown, a retired Army specialist and Gulf War veteran, was present during the demolition of the weapons depot in the Khamisiyah region. He claims he began to feel sick just 15 minutes after the building was demolished.

“I came home sick and the problems continue,” Brown said. “This has been going on for 34 years.”

Included among the unreleased documents are interview transcripts with troops who also were present during the demolitions. This information could help doctors establish a timeline for GWI, which could help with the identification of effective treatments.

Brown is helping to lead the effort in the push for these critical documents to be released, along with veteran advocacy groups Veterans for Common Sense and the Vietnam Veterans of America.

“Whether [declassifying the documents] reveals something — that remains to be seen,” said Army veteran Anthony Hardie, a former staff sergeant and national director of Veterans for Common Sense. “It is a matter of justice to Gulf War veterans.”

While efforts from veterans’ advocacy organizations have been persistent, the declassification and subsequent releases of Gulf War Illness-related documents have been slow and inconsistent.

Despite this, Gulf War veterans continue to push for answers so that there is a stronger understanding of the largely misdiagnosed illness.

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