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FYI

CNN reported that a new US Army report confirmed that among active-duty soldiers and activated National Guard and reserves there were 128 confirmed suicides and 15 suspected suicides in 2008. The number is the Army's highest for one year since tracking began in 1980. In 2007 the Army had 115 confirmed suicides.

As if those statistics weren't alarming enough, the numbers of in 2009 are even higher:

The Army said 24 soldiers are believed to have committed suicide in January alone -- six times as many as killed themselves in January 2008--and 14 more are under investigation. That equals more deaths than the ones reported in combat from Iraq and Afghanistan, by all branches of the Armed Forces.

An informative article in Griper Blade (Feb 6, below) quotes John Soltz, an Iraq war vet and founder of VoteVets.org, told MSNBC's Tamron Hall: ""Unfortunately, I don't find [the rise in suicides] very surprising." He said that, of the some 160,000 troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, "twenty thousand of them are medicated on different things like Prozac and Zoloft."

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD, Soltz said, wasn't considered seriously enough and, if a soldier does complain of mental or emotional stress, Army doctors will "just give you a pill and send you back to combat." This was corroborated by the Hartford Courant in a 2006 investigation Hartford Courant which found: "a growing number of mentally troubled service members who are being kept in combat and treated with potent psychotropic medications -- a little-examined practice driven in part by a need to maintain troop strength."

"Antidepressant medications with potentially serious side effects are being dispensed with little or no monitoring and sometimes minimal counseling, despite FDA warnings that the drugs can increase suicidal thoughts."

"Military doctors treating combat stress symptoms are sending some soldiers back to the front lines after rest and a three-day regimen of drugs."

"The emphasis on maintaining troop numbers has led some military doctors to misjudge the severity of mental health symptoms."

The problem, as the author of the Griper Brigade article sees it, "is that the Army can't afford to diagnose Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, since PTSD patients can't return to combat. So they diagnose other, less serious disorders and treat them with pills. Not only do the pills come with suicide warnings, but they're "treating" a problem these troops don't have."

"We are, quite literally, killing our troops by pretending to treat disorders they don't actually have -- while not treating the disorder they do."

A follow-up Infomail will focus on a most important article in TIME Magazine, "America's Medicated Army" By Mark Thompson , published June 5, 2008 (when I was travelling). It should have, but didn't grab as much attention as it deserves.

Contact: Vera Hassner Sharav
veracare@ahrp.org
212-595-8974

<http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/02/05/army.suicides/>

CNN

February 5, 2009

Army official: Suicides in January 'terrifying'
From Barbara Starr and Mike Mount

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- One week after the U.S. Army announced record suicide rates among its soldiers last year, the service is worried about a spike in possible suicides in the new year. If reports of suicides are confirmed, more soldiers will have taken their lives in January than died in combat.

The Army said 24 soldiers are believed to have committed suicide in January alone -- six times as many as killed themselves in January 2008, according to statistics released Thursday. The Army said it already has confirmed seven suicides, with 17 additional cases pending that it believes investigators will confirm as suicides for January.

If those prove true, more soldiers will have killed themselves than died in combat last month. According to Pentagon statistics, there were 16 U.S. combat deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq in January.

"This is terrifying," an Army official said. "We do not know what is going on."

Col. Kathy Platoni, chief clinical psychologist for the Army Reserve and National Guard, said that the long, cold months of winter could be a major contributor to the January spike. "There is more hopelessness and helplessness because everything is so dreary and cold," she said.

But Platoni said she sees the multiple deployments, stigma associated with seeking treatment and the excessive use of anti-depressants as ongoing concerns for mental-health professionals who work with soldiers.

Those who are seeking mental-health care often have their treatment disrupted by deployments. Deployed soldiers also have to deal with the stress of separations from families. "When people are apart you have infidelity, financial problems, substance abuse and child behavioral problems," Platoni said. "The more deployments, the more it is exacerbated."

Platoni also said that while the military has made a lot of headway in training leaders on how to deal with soldiers who may be suffering from depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, "there is still a huge problem with leadership who shame them when they seek treatment."

The anti-depressants prescribed to soldiers can have side effects that include suicidal thoughts. Those side effects reportedly are more common in people 18 to 24.

Concern about last month's suicide rate was so high, Congress and the Army leadership were briefed. In addition, the Army took the rare step of releasing data for the month rather than waiting to issue it as part of annual statistics at the end of the year.

In January 2008, the Army recorded two confirmed cases of suicides <<http://topics.cnn.com/topics/Suicide>> and two other cases it was investigating.

Last week, in releasing the report that showed a record number of suicides in 2008, the Army said it soon will conduct servicewide training to help identify soldiers at risk of suicide. The program, which will run February 15 through March 15, will include training to recognize behaviors that may lead to suicide and instruction on how to intervene. The Army will follow the training with another teaching program, from March 15 to June 15, focused on suicide prevention at all unit levels.

The 2008 numbers were the highest annual level of suicides among soldiers since the Pentagon began tracking the rate 28 years ago. The Army said 128 soldiers were confirmed to have committed suicide in 2008, and an additional 15 were suspected of having killed themselves. The statistics cover active-duty soldiers and activated National Guard and reserves.

The Army's confirmed rate of suicides in 2008 was 20.2 per 100,000 soldiers. The nation's suicide rate was 19.5 per 100,000 people in 2005, the most recent figure available, Army officials said last month.

Suicides for Marines were also up in 2008. There were 41 in 2008, up from 33 in 2007 and 25 in 2006, according to a Marines report.

In addition to the new training, the service has a program called Battlemind, intended to prepare soldiers and their families to cope with the stresses of war before, during and after deployment. It also is intended to help detect mental-health issues before and after deployments.

The Army and the National Institute of Mental Health signed an agreement in October to conduct research to identify factors affecting the mental and behavioral health of soldiers and to share strategies to lower the suicide rate. The five-year study will examine active-duty, National Guard and reserve soldiers and their families.

CNN's Adam Levine contributed to this report.

Don't Miss

* Army to report record number of suicides

<<http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/01/29/army.suicides/index.html>>

* Troops won't get Purple Heart for stress disorder

<<http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/01/06/ptsd.purple.heart/index.html>>

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<http://griperblade.blogspot.com/2009/02/only-solution-given-is-pills.html>

Griper Blade

Friday, February 06, 2009

'The Only Solution Given is Pills'

The Army has a bit of a problem. Despite efforts to curb suicide among troops, Army suicides continue to rise. "One week after the U.S. Army announced record suicide rates among its soldiers last year, the service is worried about a spike in possible suicides in the new year," CNN reported yesterday. "The Army said it already has confirmed seven suicides, with 17 additional cases pending that it believes investigators will confirm as suicides for January.

"If those prove true, more soldiers will have killed themselves than died in combat last month. According to Pentagon statistics, there were 16 U.S. combat deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq in January."

In fact, the Army has seen a rise in suicide every year for the past four years. To combat the problem, the service has created a "battle-buddy" program, which is basically the buddy system for suicide, but this has turned out to be as ineffective as you might have thought it would be.

In 2005, in testimony to a House Appropriations subcommittee, the Army's surgeon general placed the blame squarely on the troops. "That's still part of our culture: Real men don't see [mental health counselors]." said Lt. Gen. Kevin Kiley. "I would like to see a culture that resets the force mentally." Macho, tough guy culture was killing troops, but it seems a pretty safe assumption that this culture had been with the Army longer than its suicide problem. I don't remember the Army having a previous reputation as being a place for sharing and emotional support. Clearly, this "real men" culture -- which, of course, includes real women -- may be aggravating the problem, but it couldn't possibly be the cause.

For their part, the Army seems at a loss to explain the real cause of the suicides. "This is terrifying," Col. Kathy Platoni, chief clinical

psychologist for the Army Reserve and National Guard told CNN. "We do not know what is going on." She speculated that maybe it was winter blahs.

"There is more hopelessness and helplessness because everything is so dreary and cold," she said.

"But Platoni said she sees the multiple deployments, stigma associated with seeking treatment and the excessive use of anti-depressants as ongoing concerns for mental-health professionals who work with soldiers," CNN reported.

Now we're getting someplace.

"Unfortunately, I don't find [the rise in suicides] very surprising," John Soltz, an Iraq war vet and founder of VoteVets.org, told MSNBC's Tamron Hall. He said that, of the some 160,000 troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, "twenty thousand of them are medicated on different things like Prozac and Zoloft."

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD, Soltz said, wasn't considered seriously enough and, if a soldier does complain of mental or emotional stress, Army doctors will "just give you a pill and send you back to combat."

In a June TIME magazine piece titled "America's Medicated Army" journalist Mark Thompson spoke to a service member about his experience in Iraq. "You don't always know who the bad guys are. When you search someone's house, you have it built up in your mind that these guys are terrorists, but when you go in, there's little bitty tiny shoes and toys on the floor -- things like that started affecting me a lot more than I thought they would," said Sergeant Christopher LeJeune. "It's not easy for soldiers to admit the problems that they're having over there for a variety of reasons. If they do admit it, then the only solution given is pills." LeJeune says he was given the antidepressant Zoloft and the antianxiety drug clonazepam.

Looking at the warnings, this seems like an insane combination. Zoloft warnings include, "You may have thoughts about suicide when you first start taking an antidepressant, especially if you are younger than 24 years old." Meanwhile, clonazepam users are warned, "People who have underlying depression should be closely monitored while taking clonazepam, especially if they are at risk for attempting suicide."

In May of 2006, the Hartford Courant did an investigation of the military's drug prescription practices and found "a growing number of mentally troubled service members who are being kept in combat and treated with potent psychotropic medications -- a little-examined practice driven in part by a need to maintain troop strength."

Among the paper's findings:

-Antidepressant medications with potentially serious side effects are being

dispensed with little or no monitoring and sometimes minimal counseling, despite FDA warnings that the drugs can increase suicidal thoughts.

-Military doctors treating combat stress symptoms are sending some soldiers back to the front lines after rest and a three-day regimen of drugs -- even though experts say the drugs typically take two to six weeks to begin working.

-The emphasis on maintaining troop numbers has led some military doctors to misjudge the severity of mental health symptoms.

If John Soltz's numbers are correct, these conditions are true for 12.5% of troops stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq. And the Army isn't tracking this at all. The TIME article tells us, "At a Pentagon that keeps statistics on just about everything, there is no central clearinghouse for this kind of data, and the Army hasn't consistently asked about prescription-drug use, which makes it difficult to track." In fact, TIME tells us:

Military families wonder about the [Army's reliance on prescription drugs], according to Joyce Raezer of the private National Military Family Association. "Boy, it's really nice to have these drugs," she recalls a military doctor saying, "so we can keep people deployed." And professionals have their doubts. "Are we trying to bandage up what is essentially an insufficient fighting force?" asks Dr. Frank Ochberg, a veteran psychiatrist and founding board member of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies.

Given everything we know about the use of psychotropic drugs to medicate soldiers, it seems amazing that few would make the connection with the rising suicide rates. But admitting the connection would've meant an admission of failure by the Bush administration -- something they just didn't do. The military was "completely overextended by the Bush administration," said Soltz, adding that he hoped the Obama administration would do a better job of addressing these issues.

That hope should be shared by most of us, since it seems pretty clear that we're killing our own troops in an attempt to keep them in the field.

-Annoyed man from Wisconsin

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