

Award Number: W81XWH-11-1-0811

TITLE: Developing a Meaningful Life: Social Reintegration of Service-Members and Veterans with Spinal Cord Injury

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REPORT DATE: October 2013

TYPE OF REPORT: Annual

PREPARED FOR: U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command
Fort Detrick, Maryland 21702-5012

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT: Approved for Public Release;
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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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|---|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| 1. REPORT DATE October 2011H | | 2. REPORT TYPE CAnnual | | 3. DATES COVERED 30 September 2012–2J September 2011H | |
| 4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Developing a Meaningful Life: Social Reintegration of Service-Members and Veterans with Spinal Cord Injury | | | | 5a. CONTRACT NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5b. GRANT NUMBER W81XWH-11-1-0811 | |
| | | | | 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER | |
| 6. AUTHOR(S) Seth D. Messinger, PhD – Principal Investigator Mark Luborsky, PhD – Co-Principal Investigator E-Mail: | | | | 5d. PROJECT NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5e. TASK NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER | |
| 7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) University of Maryland Baltimore County, Baltimore, MD 21250 Wayne State University, 87 E Ferry St., Detroit MI 48202 | | | | 8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER | |
| | | | | 10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) | |
| 9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command Fort Detrick, Maryland 21702-5012 | | | | 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) | |
| | | | | 12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for Public Release; Distribution Unlimited | |
| 13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES | | | | | |
| 14. ABSTRACT Spinal cord injuries now occur in nearly one quarter of the casualties from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. We know our military treatment facilities are seriously challenged by these casualties for several reasons including co-morbidities associated with blast injuries and the lengthy rehabilitation required. We also now know medical treatments that promise to return the fractured bodies to approximate pre-injury function. Yet, we lack basic knowledge of the long-term outcomes defined as personally and socially meaningful by survivors and families who are seeking to heal the fractured relationships with valued communities. This gap limits our ability to deliver on the promise given by advances in battlefield trauma care and rehabilitation which is to enable a return to full lives in the community (Messinger 2010; Luborsky 1993, 1994a). Today's problem is that acute care treatments for the physical break are not matched by knowledge of how survivors continue life, conceptualize SCI and return to a full life. The US Surgeon General (DHHS 2004) faults the literatures' narrow incident-based focus on acute medical events and neglect of ongoing processes after events; this narrowness neglects how people return to a valued life with disability (Verbrugge & Jette 1994). Yet, consensus is emerging that long-term outcomes are the next frontier (IOM 2005, WHO 2001) requiring us to ask new questions and use methods suited to cultural meanings and roles (Lysack et al 2007; Messinger 2010). An ample literature documents negative outcomes from inadequately treating the social and personal afflictions after SCI and other mobility loss. Thus, the hard earned knowledge of physical skills for living with altered bodies remains unmatched by societal practices to equip people with a culturally meaningful sense of community needed to thrive. We argue the time is ripe to discover the ways people with SCI create a sense of connection to meaningful communities and cultural identities that is key to long-term success. | | | | | |
| 15. SUBJECT TERMS Spinal Cord Injury, Community Reintegration, Qualitative Research | | | | | |
| 16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: | | | 17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT | 18. NUMBER OF PAGES | 19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON |
| a. REPORT U | b. ABSTRACT U | c. THIS PAGE U | | | 19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) |

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Introduction:

Spinal cord injuries now occur in nearly one quarter of the casualties from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. We know our military treatment facilities are seriously challenged by these casualties for several reasons including co-morbidities associated with blast injuries and the lengthy rehabilitation required. We also now know medical treatments that promise to return the fractured bodies to approximate pre-injury function. Yet, we lack basic knowledge of the long-term outcomes defined as personally and socially meaningful by survivors and families who are seeking to heal the fractured relationships with valued communities. This gap limits our ability to deliver on the promise given by advances in battlefield trauma care and rehabilitation which is to enable a return to full lives in the community (Messinger 2010; Luborsky 1993, 1994a).

Today's problem is that acute care treatments for the physical break are not matched by knowledge of how survivors continue life, conceptualize SCI and return to a full life. The US Surgeon General (DHHS 2004) faults the literatures' narrow incident-based focus on acute medical events and neglect of ongoing processes after events; this narrowness neglects how people return to a valued life with disability (Verbrugge & Jette 1994). Yet, consensus is emerging that long-term outcomes are the next frontier (IOM 2007, WHO 2001) one which require us to ask new questions and use methods suited to cultural meanings and roles (Lysack et al 2007; Messinger 2010). An ample literature documents the negative outcomes from not adequately treating the social and personal afflictions after SCI, and other mobility loss. Thus, the hard earned knowledge of physical skills for living with altered bodies remains unmatched by societal practices to equip people with a culturally meaningful sense of community needed to thrive. We argue the time is ripe to discover the ways people with SCI create a sense of connection to meaningful communities and cultural identities that is key to long-term success.

Body:

This project was approved for funding in September 2011. The principal investigators initiated applications to their university HIC/IRB boards for human subjects research approval in accordance with established requirements of the funding agency for the two sites to submit protocols to their respective IRBs. UMBC's IRB initially approved the protocol on October 25, 2011 with final approval after CDMRP requested changes came in late April 2012. Wayne State University's IRB gave final approval to their study on April 17, 2012. We received word from Lori Walther at CDMRP that we had approval to begin our project in May 2012. Following receipt of the IRB approval from CDMRP we inaugurated the next stage in research startup.

In the past 12 months of research activities UMBC and WSU met the goals laid out in the SOW. These include:

- Hired and Trained Research Assistant Staff members (one at each site)
- Updated literature reviews for relevant research findings and methods
- Training of team members in ethnographic methods of research and analysis
- Develop and refined interview guide
- Organize the community panel
- Initiated collaboration with recruitment sources and sites
- Recruit participants (we have recruited 3)
- Initiate interviews.
- PIs at UMBC and WSU conducted regular meetings via phone and email

Key Research Accomplishments:

Research activities began in June 2012. To this date our research accomplishments have included:

- Hired and Trained Research Assistant Staff members (one at each site)
- Training of team members in ethnographic methods of research and analysis
- Updated literature reviews for relevant research findings and methods
- Develop and refined interview guide
- Organize the community panel
- Recruit participants (we have recruited 3)
- Initiate interviews.
- PIs at UMBC and WSU conducted regular meetings via phone and email

Reportable Outcomes

At this point there are no reportable outcomes from research activities.

Conclusions

Recruitment for this study has been challenging. We have initiated collaborative relationships with multiple chapters of the Paralyzed Veterans of America. In addition to this we have successfully approached the DAV about promoting our study. An announcement was placed in the DAV magazine which elicited over 20 potential participants. Unfortunately none of them met the criteria for inclusion. They were either not veterans of OIF or OEF, or they did not have an SCI. We have received word from PN (the magazine of PVA) that an announcement of our study will be placed in their December publication. We have also established a collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh in order to have our project disseminated through their database of OIF / OEF veterans with SCI.

Furthermore, and in line with our recruitment and sampling strategies, we have accessed the networks of our currently recruited participants in order to meet our sample requirements.

If these efforts do not boost our enrollment we will apply to alter our inclusion criteria to include all veterans with SCI.

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