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Occupational health and safety challenges for the ADF

THE PROFESSION OF ARMS is inherently dangerous. Despite this fact, and the ADF's current expeditionary posture and high rate of effort in warlike operations over the past decade or so, at the date of writing Australia has sustained no fatalities due to hostile action in Somalia, Rwanda, Bougainville, East Timor, the Solomons or either Gulf War. Unfortunately, this happy situation of low operational casualty rates is not mirrored in the ADF's domestic activities. The rates of death and serious personal injury encountered in garrison conditions across all Australian Services remain considerably higher than for matched industry groups. As a result of injuries, significant numbers of personnel are unavailable for deployment and are restricted in performance of their normal duties.

Between 1998 and 2002, reported occupational health and safety (OH&S) incidents in the ADF increased, as did reported lost-time incidents. More significantly, the lost-time injury frequency rate per million hours worked doubled, as did Defence's liability for Military Compensation and Rehabilitation Scheme claims. By 2000, Defence's annual OH&S cost per uniformed member was almost 3 times that for comparable civilian employee groups. Commanders and supervisors at all levels are greatly concerned for the health and safety of their subordinates, but there is an obvious lack of means to give effect to their good intentions.

The persisting high injury rate among ADF personnel is both ethically unacceptable and financially unsustainable. The report of the F111 Deseal/Reseal Board of Inquiry, subsequent development of the Air Force Safety Management System, roll-out of the Defence Injury Prevention Program, and similar initiatives constitute an impressive rhetoric foreshadowing organisational reform. Establishment of the Centre for Military and Veterans' Health (CMVH) will provide unparalleled opportunities for focused research and education on the ADF's long-standing and emerging OH&S concerns. While the development of Centres of Expertise in Occupational Health within the office of the Director General, Defence Health Service and the Directorate of Air Force Safety is encouraging, these Centres require appropriate and continuing resources to be effective and improve OH&S outcomes for Defence. All levels within the organisation must recognise that effective OH&S measures are integral to the ADF's business; they are not optional extras. "Cultural change" is essential to achieve the goal of zero avoidable injuries and deaths among ADF members.

There are currently many more Reservists with formal qualifications and expertise in occupational medicine and other areas of OH&S practice than there are uniformed specialists with these skills. The ADF has made a commitment to increase its in-house OH&S capabilities, but this will take time. Meanwhile, relevant Reservists may expect to be tasked to provide additional specialised services to Defence — as primary sources of particular advice; as mentors of Permanent Forces’ trainees in their disciplines; and as educators for academic programs and courses provided by CMVH and others. Through these means,

Reservists from the health services can once again make invaluable contributions to the long-term health and welfare of all ADF personnel.

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Editor, *ADF Health*



The Journal’s progress

ADF Health, Journal of the Australian Defence Health Service, conceived in 1998 and launched in 1999, is now an established member of the growing international collection of peer-reviewed publications devoted to military medicine. The Editor of this issue, Group Captain Peter Wilkins, has published yet another excellent edition, the tenth to appear.

The articles published in *ADF Health* cover many topics: diving medicine, altitude and aerospace medicine; the impact of landmines, depleted uranium munitions, and thermobaric weapons; the medical aspects of ADF deployments to Bougainville, East Timor and elsewhere; the military role in evacuation of Australians after the Bali bombing; military forensic medicine — the list goes on, and is as diverse as are the demands on health care professionals in the Defence Health Service. An update from the Army Malaria Research Institute and back-page reports from units throughout the Defence Health Service continue to be regular features.

Another continuing strength of *ADF Health* is its historical articles, and history clearly reminds us of the importance of maintaining a dedicated and competent military medical, surgical and nursing capacity. In the New Guinea campaign of World War II, the control of malaria by the Australian-developed drug atebirin was a powerful contributor to victory. Before atebirin, in December 1943, the incidence of malaria in Australian troops in New Guinea (except the Aitape–Wewak area) was a staggering 750 cases per 1000 per year. After atebirin prophylaxis was introduced, this fell to less than 50 cases per 1000 per year in September

1944. During the same period, malaria rates in the Japanese army approached 100%, with mortality at a steady 10%.¹

In New Guinea, and in every other campaign that history records, the maintenance of the health of the troops was a key determinant of the victory. The prevention of casualties, speedy and safe evacuation of casualties, and effective treatment of illness and injury are the three vital contributions that the health services make to the success of the ADF.

This Journal contributes to the knowledge that is essential to the progress of the Defence Health Service. I thank all my editorial colleagues for their hard work and unstinting support in making the Journal so successful during its first five years. I thank Craig Bingham for his very great assistance and professionalism as the Production Editor. Lastly, and most importantly, I thank all the contributors, reviewers and correspondents for lending their expertise to *ADF Health* and the readers, both within and beyond the Defence Health Service, who have responded to its pages with interest and enjoyment.

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1. Sweeney T. Malaria frontline. Australian Army research during World War Two. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003: 239-240.