

# The Centre for Military and Veterans' Health

## An innovative approach to Defence health issues

The Australian Defence Force has achieved an international reputation as a professional fighting force, largely as a result of the diligent execution of duty of its personnel in the face of operational, occupational and environmental hazards.

The ADF maintains its hard-earned reputation by leveraging advanced technologies and investing in its personnel. Well-trained ADF personnel are required to demonstrate high levels of readiness, technical skill (military and professional), discipline and expertise. They must also be capable of making good, ethical judgments. These qualities typify members of a modern professional military force. Indeed, *The Australian Approach to Warfare and Future Warfighting Concept* identifies professionalism and professional mastery as central components of the ADF approach to warfighting.

In 2000, in the Defence Health Service Strategic Plan, Ramsay echoed these sentiments:

The strength in the ADF lies in its people and their ability to carry out their duties in an operational environment. In the case of the Defence Health Services (DHS), those people must be trained in all necessary aspects for the delivery of health services, to include training that is specifically tailored for operational deployment. The skill sets learnt during that training must be maintained through a system of validation, currency training and continuing professional development.

At the time, significant concern had been expressed that the skill levels of many health care providers were lacking within the operational context.

The DHS has sought an academic focus to help develop and maintain the professional mastery of ADF health care personnel so that they may best support the activities of the ADF. Recognition of the professional skills and status of ADF health care personnel is also important in the ADF quest to recruit and retain quality health care staff in an increasingly competitive global health services market.

The official opening of the Centre for Military and Veterans' Health (CMVH) on 6 April 2004 was the culmination of the joint efforts of staff from the Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs (DVA) over the previous 3 years to establish a system for maintaining professional mastery in the area of military and veterans' health. This new unit, located within the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Herston Campus of the University of Queensland, is a consortium including the University of Adelaide and Charles Darwin University (Menzies School of Health Research). CMVH is staffed by university appointees (including staff with military experience), Defence civilians, and serving full-time and Reserve military health officers presently working under Acting Director Professor Andrew Wilson. Shortly, Professor Niki Ellis, an occupational and public health physician with extensive international experience, will assume her responsibilities as the foundation Professor of Military and Veterans' Health and Director of CMVH.

CMVH aims to unite health expertise within the academic, Defence and DVA communities and focus it on health issues pertinent to serving and ex-serving personnel. Aligning academic programs with research initiatives, CMVH has four major focuses: Research, Professional Development, E-health, and a Think Tank.

### Research

A number of reports published in the 1990s, including the JP 2060 report, highlighted the fragmented and uncoordinated nature of the research underpinning some ADF health decisions and the lack of focus on the threats with the greatest potential to affect operations. To improve coordination and focus of research of operational relevance, DHS has established the Defence Health and Human Performance Research Committee (DHHPRC) to prioritise health research conducted within Defence. It is from the annual list of DHHPRC research priorities that CMVH directs research endeavours. In its first year of operations, CMVH has established the Deployed Health Studies Unit as the vehicle for researching the effect of deployments on the health of ADF personnel. CMVH has also bid for tenders to undertake research into the health of submariners and subsections of the Veterans' communities, and is proposing research platforms in applied epidemiology.

### Professional development

The first priority for CMVH in the field of professional development was establishing the Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Masters in Public Health (Defence), designed specifically for the academic needs of DHS and DVA staff. The Public Health (Defence) program is open to all Australian Defence personnel and contractors and DVA staff. The degree may be taken part-time or full-time, by either distance learning or attendance.

The core of the MPH (Defence) program is a platform of research, management and environmental and occupational health, with a broad selection of electives building to specific streams. The program provides development opportunities for medical professionals, scientific officers and laboratory assistants, environmental health officers, preventive medicine personnel, health administration officers, medical assistants and other personnel with a public health interest. Some 30 students undertook subjects from the extensive catalogue available in 2004, and enrolments for first semester 2005 indicate continuing strong interest in what CMVH has to offer. CMVH's first MPH graduate, Wing Commander Mike Sear, will receive his Testamur in early 2005. Work is underway to extend the range of professional development offerings to include a Doctor of Public Health program, which should be available in first semester 2006. Two students have also enrolled in PhD programs. (*Continued on back cover* →)

# The Centre for Military and Veterans' Health *continued...*



## **E-health**

CMVH provides an avenue for e-health advice and research for stakeholders. CMVH also acts as an avenue for interested students to gain postgraduate training (Graduate Certificate, Diploma and Masters in E-health) in the area of e-health through a close affiliation with the University of Queensland Centre for On-line Health. The outcomes of a scoping study commissioned in mid 2004 will guide CMVH's further involvement in this area.

## **Think Tank**

A unique aspect of the CMVH contract is the requirement to host a Defence and Veterans' Health Think Tank. The purpose of this think tank is to explore broad

strategic "Blue-Sky" issues of concern to stakeholders and provide information and advice where necessary. The first CMVH think tank, conducted in September 2004, addressed the topic of "Health and well-being consequences following a military deployment". A follow-on think tank activity in March 2005 examined the management of post-deployment health problems in a primary care setting, with a view to producing clinical practice guidelines for military and veterans' health care providers.

More information about CMVH and the Master of Public Health (Defence) program can be obtained through the CMVH link on the Defence website: <http://www.defence.gov.au/dpe/dhs/links/index.htm>.

### **Group Captain David Emonson**

Chief of Operations, Centre for Military and Veterans' Health

### **Lieutenant Commander Nigel Carlton RAN**

Professional Development Officer, Centre for Military and Veterans' Health

