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Occupational and Environmental Medicine Portfolio

Mission

The Occupational and Environmental Medicine Portfolio provides leadership and professional consultative services to medical providers about military occupational and environmental medicine; vision conservation; hearing injuries; and injury or illness from chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive materials. Elements of the portfolio serve the Army and the Department of Defense with the goal of preventing illness and injury that occurs in the workplace or work environment, both deployed and in garrison.

Background

Elements of the Occupational and Environmental Medicine Portfolio have been around for nearly 70 years, since the establishment of the U.S. Army Industrial Hygiene Laboratory at the beginning of World War II.

Clients

The portfolio's clients are Army commanders and organizations, including Army medical leaders, treatment facilities and deployed units. The portfolio focuses on population-based prevention. The portfolio staff does not treat individual patients.

Structure and Organization

The Occupational and Environmental Medicine Portfolio is one of nine portfolios that make up the Army Institute of Public Health, a subordinate command of the U.S. Army Public Health Command. The portfolio is comprised of five programs:

*** Army Hearing Program —** This program focuses on preventing noise-induced hearing injury and disability in Army Soldiers and retirees, their families and Army civilians. The program also focuses on improved communication abilities on the battlefield. The AHP impacts Army force projection and Soldier hearing health by delivering on-demand and anticipated support to Army hearing program managers worldwide. One example of how this program achieves its mission is through providing training for and fielding of the Combat Arms Earplug to all Soldiers in the Army Training and Doctrine Command before Basic Rifle Marksmanship, thereby ensuring that Soldiers hearing remains acute enough to fight and survive in battle. The program also serves as the functional proponent for an audiometric monitoring database for the Army, directly supporting DOD hearing health surveillance. This database collects the kinds of hearing injuries that are treated in Army medical facilities and allows hearing experts to identify priorities for mitigation and treatment. The AHP collaborates with the Army acquisition and research communities to establish hearing protection and Tactical Communication and Protective Systems evaluation criteria for DOD-qualified products.

*** Tri-Service Vision Conservation and Readiness Program —** Vision conservation and readiness is the combination of efforts aimed at providing eye-safe workplaces and activities, and ensuring that the DOD workforce has the vision and eye health needed to accomplish its missions. This program, which includes vision experts from all services, focuses on optimizing vision, optical and eye health of service members and retirees, their families and DOD civilians. One example of how this program is achieving its mission is through coordinating with the Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center to develop a first-of-its-kind, ongoing Eye Injury Surveillance Report based on exam data from DOD medical records. This report provides detailed demographic, occupational, cause and type of injury data for outpatient, inpatient and deployment-related eye injuries for all active-duty members across the DOD. In addition, the report provides surveillance tools to track eye injury trends at installation level across the DOD and a summary of vision loss as a result of eye injury.

This program also provides approximately three vision readiness and conservation courses yearly to occupational health, industrial hygiene, safety and optometric personnel. These courses provide the elements of establishing and/or enhancing installation-level vision conservation

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and readiness programs. Instruction concentrates on DOD and service-specific regulatory requirements, eye hazard identification strategies, and eye injury mitigation best practices to improve workplace eye safety and reduce workers compensation claims for eye injuries.

*** Environmental Medicine Program —** This program provides professional consultative services to physicians and medical administrators in military environmental medicine. Experts in this program evaluate what health effects can be determined from population exposures to the air, water, soil and other environmental factors. Some examples of how this program supports public health include conducting an epidemiological study of 6,000 individuals potentially exposed to a sulfur fire in Iraq; conducting outreach and arranging a screening medical surveillance examination for Army Corps of Engineer civilians potentially exposed to a carcinogen while deployed; and visiting the Army Central Command's area of responsibility to assess the environmental and potential health effects of burn pits used in theater.

*** Occupational Medicine Program —** This program focuses on providing professional consultative services to physicians and medical administrators in military occupational medicine and occupational health nursing. Experts in this program monitor, prevent, mitigate and advise Army medical providers about injuries, diseases and environmental exposures in the workplace. Some examples of how this program supports public health include performing site assistance visits for occupational medicine clinics serving DOD employees; creating technical guidance for medical surveillance for DOD employees with workplace exposures; and training resident occupational medicine physicians to serve DOD employees and Soldiers.

*** Surety Medicine Program —** This program focuses on preventing and mitigating illness or injury to Army Soldiers and/or Army civilians who handle chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive, or CBRNE materials. Experts in this program provide unique training that qualifies healthcare providers to deliver required services and care to these worker populations. The program also administers four specialized training courses to clinical providers at sites supporting these special populations. The program serves as the Army's repository of subject-matter expertise in correctly supporting and documenting the health of workers who work with nuclear, biological and chemical materials.

Occupational and Environmental Medicine's People

Approximately 45 people work in the Occupational and Environmental Medicine Portfolio. They include military and civilian personnel in a broad range of medical and scientific disciplines. Board-certified physicians, optometrists, audiologists, occupational health nurses and acoustic engineers are just some of the occupations within the portfolio. In addition to their professional experience, most staff members hold doctoral or master's degrees. The program supplements its expertise from multidisciplinary public health experts within USAPHC and establishes working partnerships with other federal organizations, including the Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Benefits to the Army

The Occupational and Environmental Medicine Portfolio contains a blend of professional disciplines and specialties that best aligns with the clinicians who are engaged in the broad and complex practices of clinical occupational health, including its closely related practice of environmental medicine, that are present in the globally-based and forward-deployed armed services. These experts are vitally important to the prevention of acute health effects and injuries attributable to chemical, physical and biological stressors in the battlefield environment and the workplace that could affect critical performance tasks. And it is this team of experts that stands athwart the potential insidious effects that these stressors may have upon some workers and servicemembers that could, absent the application of their expertise, lead to chronic diseases and disability. The multi-faceted application of their collective skills results in safe and healthful work environments along with medically ready servicemembers and civilians.