

By William Pomroy
This week saw the fourth meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Suicide Prevention Group which was created last November. In its short life it has already covered many important issues, including the risks posed by the internet and the need for improved reporting of suicide in the media. This week it turned its attention to the issue of suicide among individuals leaving the armed forces. This topic was chosen for discussion in light of new research published in March this year by Professor Nav Kapur from the Centre for Suicide Prevention at the University of Manchester, and colleagues.

For a long time mental health problems have clearly been associated with deployment to combat and peacekeeping operations but the literature showing an association with suicide specifically has remained mixed. Nav Kapur and colleagues examined the suicide rate in a very large sample of 233,803 individuals, who left the UK Armed Forces, and their ten year study titled 'Suicide after Leaving the UK Armed Forces - A Cohort Study' has significantly advanced our knowledge of suicide among veterans. The research found that although the overall rate of suicide was not greater than that in the general population, the risk of suicide in men aged 24 years and younger who had left the Armed Forces was approximately two to three times higher than in the general and serving populations. Perhaps surprisingly, the risk of suicide was greatest in males with a short length of service - and those of lower rank. Less surprising, but most problematic was the observation that the rate of contact with specialist mental health was lowest in the age groups at greatest risk of suicide. This research counters the perceived logic that the longer an individual serves the more likely he / she is to struggle to adapt to civilian life once they've left the armed forces. While this is surprising, it does mean that there is now a clearly identifiable group who need increased support targeted towards them specifically; males, who had served in the Army, with a short length of Service, who were untrained, and of low rank. Of course the research isn't able to give any further explanations as to the triggers involved in the individual suicides whether the individuals concerned were discharged for psychological, physical or other personal reasons, whether they saw action or other individual factors. To that end more research is needed to build on this foundation, including the use of psychological autopsies. I'm aware that the MOD has been co-operative to date, and am hopeful they will continue to facilitate further research. What was most evident from the meeting this week is that an increased awareness of the problem is a vital first step towards tailoring the required support. Indications are that practical and psychological preparation is needed for individuals prior to entering and leaving the armed forces, including attempts to break the disinclination to seek help, along with increased dedicated mental health services for veterans. The MOD are currently piloting community mental health services in six areas and I hope they will report back on these shortly, before beginning to roll out this form of service across the UK. In conclusion this study has cast a clearer light on where the problem exists. It helps to increase our knowledge of the issue, and provides the opportunity to targeted support to veterans and seek ways of tackling the problem.