TRANSITION-RELATED MEDICAL INTERVENTION ASSOCIATED WITH REDUCED SUICIDAL THINKING IN TRANSGENDER VETERANS

Baton Rouge, LA, 01/16/2018 – Gender affirmation surgical and hormone interventions are associated with reduced suicidal thinking and symptoms of depression in transgender veterans, according to a new study published in the academic journal, Psychological Medicine [http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0033291717003853].

Data were gathered by researchers at VA Puget Sound from 206 self-identified transgender veterans across the United States in an online survey. Lowest levels of recent suicidal thinking and symptoms of depression were seen in transgender veterans with a history of both hormone therapy as well as gender affirmation surgeries. For example, 3.6% of transgender veterans with a history of hormone therapy and both chest and genital surgeries indicated thoughts of suicide in the two-weeks prior to the study whereas 39% of those without a history of any gender affirmation medical intervention reported suicidal thinking. These results indicate that comprehensive transition-related medical interventions such as gender affirmation surgeries and hormone therapy may be vitally important to reducing suicide risk in transgender veterans.

“Transgender veterans are between 3-5 times more likely to experience suicidal thinking and attempt suicide than the general population. Policy makers and health care facilities need to be equipped with data to determine whether access to comprehensive gender affirmation medical care may be an important component of suicide prevention efforts,” noted lead author of the study Raymond Tucker, Ph.D. (Louisiana State University).

This study is the first to investigate whether transition-related medical interventions such as hormone therapy and chest/genital surgeries relate to suicidal thinking in a sample of transgender veterans specifically. Multiple studies regarding this relationship have been published with samples of transgender adults, but until this study no work has specifically studied this important relationship in transgender veterans.

Under current VA policy, eligible transgender veterans can receive medically necessary care including hormone therapy, mental health counselling, preoperative evaluations, and post-operative care, although not gender affirming surgical procedures or cosmetic interventions. Veterans who access transition-related care outside of the VHA may have highly variable access to care through their employer insurance or direct payment for services. The research team hopes that continued investigations will help determine the extent to which transgender veterans have access to gender affirmation medical care and what this access means for their mental health and suicide risk.

Tucker concluded that, “This line of work is critical for determining how our country can most adequately care for transgender individuals who served in our armed forces. Research in the broader transgender population suggests that access to gender affirmation interventions plays an important role in reducing mental health problems and increasing quality of life. Continued research is needed to better understand if these relationships also exist with transgender veterans.
and how those in need of transition-related medical intervention can be supported when procedures cannot be accessed."

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