

Treating a Hero

Jim's pain was the result of many things. His physical pain stemmed predominately from muscles and once they were properly identified and treated, he began to experience relief for the first time. Back pain leads to many unsuccessful spine surgeries because muscle, the major reason for back pain, is overlooked. Jim was spared from back surgery, but this was only part of the story.

Often, returning military members need pain medication and misuse them by taking more than the prescribed dosage. In certain cases, as with our injured Marine, addiction occurs. We had plans to meet for our final interview for this article and he arrived looking disheveled with slurred speech, "high" on his medication and possibly alcohol as well. Dr. Marcus told him firmly but gently that he had disrespected himself arriving in this condition, making it impossible to conduct the interview. He was visibly embarrassed. Marcus said, "How many relationships has this problem cost you?" The Marine answered "Three." Norman said, "If you think three, it's a lot more. I can't continue to treat you if you are not in a 12-step program and seeing a therapist at the VA. I will have to get a call from your sponsor that you are attending daily meetings for me to continue treating you." Marcus explained, "I can't risk giving him injections when I don't know what other chemicals are in his body. He has to be clean and sober to be treated." There are drug interactions and Dr. Marcus couldn't be sure if Jim was being honest about what he was taking before or after their visits. In this case, this young man was self-medicating not only his physical pain, but his emotional pain as well.

Pain medications will address both physical and emotional pain. Pain killers are more effective for longer periods of time in altering mood than they are for reducing pain. This is the foundation for the problem of abuse in soldiers who are also

struggling with painful emotions. Eventually, as they are taking medication for physical pain they stop differentiating their physical from their emotional pain. Any pain or discomfort comes under the umbrella of "pain" and then any discomfort can be an excuse to grab their pain killers. The relief from these medications is temporary at best. What is left when the medications wear off are the feelings they've been trying to avoid: pain, sadness, and ultimately fear. These are not easy emotions for anyone, even a soldier, to confront.

One of the problems is that young soldiers may not be ready to handle the level of stress associated with actual or anticipated battle. Better screening could possibly identify who will be at higher risk. These young men, for the most part, are running on adrenaline and testosterone. What happens to all of those other feelings, such as, loneliness, sadness and fear? Do they have the ability to cope with them without adopting maladaptive behavior? Those who come from healthy, stable families might do better than those who do not. Training of these young men should take into account their emotional needs. We have to find a way to decrease the incidence of post-traumatic stress, substance abuse, and associated chronic pain syndromes.

Given the military credo is to be tough and not show fear or pain, getting soldiers to reveal themselves is a challenge. Treating returning veterans who suffer with complex pain problems is difficult. No one specialist can take on all the work necessary to help these men and women reintegrate into civilian life. What is needed is an interdisciplinary approach with staff skilled in pain management, physical rehabilitation, addiction, psychiatric medication, and psychological interventions to give them all the help they may need.

made through the actions that were taken in Iraq and Afghanistan?" Most people's eye is on the action instead of the goal. The goal is to have a democracy. In some of these countries, they have no state, no government. There's manipulation to the fullest. Once you see these things you realize that America is the most incredible nation in the world. I believe as an American and a Marine I was defending and upholding democracy.

It is so apparent how extreme war is as you say this. I can understand how so many returning military members suffer from post-traumatic stress. You have experienced things no one should. There is an emotional cost in having made the sacrifice that you have for our country. We must remember that.

You are right about there being a cost. My family has participated in war since

the before this country was born. My ancestors have fought in every conflict since 1775. Back 15 generations. One of the greatest Marines was Chesty Puller. He received 7 Navy Crosses, which is the highest honor except the Medal of Honor. I feel honored to have followed in such great men's footsteps. Once a Marine, always a Marine. Endurance is the Marine's Creed. I have endured through all that I have experienced and I find strength in that. •