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Mental health outcomes of male UK military personnel deployed to Afghanistan and the role of combat injury: Analysis of baseline data from the ADVANCE cohort study

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What is the ADVANCE Study?

The ADVANCE Study investigates the physical and psycho-social outcomes of battlefield casualties in the long-term. The study has 1,145 participants who served in the Afghanistan War of 2002-2014. Half of the cohort have sustained serious battlefield injuries, and the other half are the control group of non-injured servicemen. The participants attend 6 study visits over a 20-year period.

What does this piece of ADVANCE research look at?

The long-term mental health outcomes of UK Armed Forces personnel who sustained serious combat injuries during deployment to Afghanistan are largely unknown. ADVANCE is the first study to look at these outcomes on a relatively large scale and over a long period of time.

The aim of this piece of ADVANCE research was to find out whether the injured group (who have experienced combat-related traumatic injury) and the uninjured comparison group have differences in terms of their mental health outcomes. We looked at depression, anxiety, PTSD and mental health multimorbidity (PTSD with depression and/or anxiety) by analysing the ADVANCE baseline data collected from the cohort.



What do the results show?

Our findings showed that the injured group had greater rates of depression, anxiety and PTSD compared to the uninjured group. However, the type of injury seemed to have a significant impact. Participants with amputation-related injuries had very similar rates of mental health problems compared to the uninjured group, whereas those with non-amputation injuries had significantly higher rates of mental health problems. We also showed that in both the injured and uninjured groups, the rates of PTSD were greater compared to the UK general population and both represented groups with increased psychological burden from multimorbidity.

Summary of the findings

- Rates of PTSD, anxiety and depression were higher in the injured vs. uninjured group:
 - Depression: 23.6% in injured vs. 16.8% in uninjured.
 - Anxiety: 20.8% in injured vs. 13.5% in uninjured.
 - PTSD: 16.9% in injured vs. 10.5% uninjured.
- Rate of mental health multimorbidity was also higher in the injured vs. uninjured group (15.3% vs. 9.8%).
- Participants with amputations reported very similar rates of mental health issues compared to the uninjured group. However, participants with non-amputation injuries were up to twice as likely to suffer from mental health issues.

One of the main questions that arises from these findings is around the differences in outcomes between the amputees and the injured non-amputees. Next steps include looking into the reasons for these differences. Follow-up data on mental health outcomes will also be analysed over the 20-year duration of ADVANCE.

Many thanks to the ADVANCE cohort for taking part and to all ADVANCE funders for their generous support.