

# NHS Launches 'Op Courage' veterans' mental health service

Doctors, nurses and other NHS staff will work with military charities to provide therapy, rehab services and, in extreme cases, inpatient care to hundreds of former soldiers, sailors and RAF personnel each year.

Those needing urgent help will receive a same day referral.

The "high intensity" treatment has already been trialled in some areas and will be rolled out across the country by next month as part of Op Courage, which brings together specialist services for veterans.

Involving charities will help NHS staff to understand the experiences and issues faced by those who have risked their lives for their country and may have lost comrades or been injured themselves.

It also helps to integrate veterans with mental ill health back in to everyday life.

Speaking at the annual Kings' Centre for Military Health Research Veterans' mental health conference at King's College London, NHS England chief executive Sir Simon Stevens said:

We owe a special debt of gratitude to those who risk all for their country and the NHS is determined to do its part in honouring that.

Anyone can be affected by mental ill health but armed forces veterans may have seen and experienced things that few others – thankfully – will.

That can create a special set of challenges which working with military charities helps to overcome and that is what is at the heart of Op Courage – ensuring that the NHS is a National Hero Service.

Over the last two years the health service has expanded mental health services as part of the NHS Long Term Plan.

More than 13,000 former troops have benefited from specialist care for lower level problems such as anxiety and depression.

Almost 2,000 more have received help for more complex problems such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The new service, which is expected to treat around 500 people a year, will focus on those in crisis, at risk of self-harm or suicide, or suffering other problems such as homelessness and addiction.

It is being rolled out after trials involving almost 200 former servicemen and women.

Veterans will be able to access any of the three tiers of treatment from a single Op Courage service in each of the seven NHS regions.

Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Johnny Mercer, said:

One of the biggest challenges we face with veterans mental healthcare in this country is making sure those who need help know where to turn.

Op Courage, a collaborative piece of work between NHS England and the Office for Veterans Affairs, will provide a clear single route for accessing specialist care.

Looking after our veterans is a national responsibility in which we all have a role to play. We all have a duty to ensure Op Courage is known about and understood up and down this country. Help is available; you can get better. Speak up. Have courage.

Op Courage is part of a nine-point NHS plan to support the Armed Forces.

Other commitments laid out in the plan include ensuring access to quality secondary care, reducing healthcare inequalities, helping with the transition to civilian life and increased support for vets' families, children and carers.

NHS England Director of Health and Justice and Armed Forces, Kate Davies CBE, said:

This is a significant step forward in our work to help the veterans most in need who may have historically slipped through the net and we are excited to outline these nine commitments as part of the NHS Long Term Plan to improve veteran healthcare.

Op Courage is a great initiative that we have developed in collaboration with veterans to bring three mental health services under one umbrella to make it easier to access for the 2.4 million vets around England who may need it.

There are around 2.4 million veterans living in the UK and around one in 20 will suffer from PTSD. A smaller number will have severe and complex mental health needs.