

Post trauma stress relief

As we approach ANZAC Day again, it's timely to remember and reflect on the sacrifice made by so many Australian men and women during past and present conflicts.

Writing in the latest issue of the quarterly journal *Torchlight*, Legacy President Colin Dunstan reminds us that this year marks the 90th anniversary of the battles in France during the final year of WW1. On ANZAC Day, 1918, the town of Villers-Bretonneux was taken, with Australian soldiers under the command of Brigadier General Pompey Elliott significantly involved. The school buildings erected in Villers-Bretonneux after WW1 were paid for by funds raised by the school children of Victoria. Signs still in existence encourage the children: "jamais oubliez Australie" – never forget Australia – for this contribution.

Of course Australians will never forget the debt we owe to our armed forces personnel for the freedom we enjoy; but for those personally involved, the memories can remain all too vivid and frightening.

Just as the political and social impact of war continues long after the fighting has finished, so too can adverse health effects continue – long after physical wounds have healed.

Official recognition was given to the condition known as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1980 following the Vietnam War. While the majority of cases of PTSD are indeed war related – war veterans, peace-keeping forces and refugees are all at high risk – it is now realised that trauma other than war can cause PTSD.

People at risk of suffering PTSD include victims of natural disasters (for instance, flood, fire, famine and earthquake), serious motor vehicle accidents and crimes such as rape, assault, armed hold-up and kidnap. The terrorist attacks in New York, Bali, Madrid and London are events that would have left the family and friends of victims severely traumatised. Also at high risk are emergency services personnel, including police, fire-fighters and health workers, such as those involved in rescue operations.

In an effort to increase awareness of PTSD and to explain where to get the best help and advice, the Commonwealth Department of Veterans Affairs, together with the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, have produced an information card which is now available from pharmacies providing the Self Care health information.

Having feelings of stress and anxiety after a traumatic event is quite normal, and most people will recover from even intense traumatic stress within a few months. However, it seems some people are more likely to suffer severely, with long term consequences.

Symptoms may occur immediately after the event, or may be delayed for months or years. Also, symptoms may vary greatly from person to person. These symptoms might include depression and/or anxiety, difficulty sleeping – often due to distressing dreams, flashbacks of the event, rage and anger, avoidance of thoughts or conversations about the event and feelings of guilt or shame.

If you or someone in your family is suffering with PTSD it is important to seek help. Your local doctor can advise you. Following a traumatic event, immediate counselling may be helpful; but remember, no matter how long ago the event occurred, treatment can still be effective.

On-going counselling, often using medicines as part of the strategy to control symptoms, has proven highly successful.

There are several self care strategies that will help as well. Try to cut down on cigarettes and alcohol – these can make stress worse. Exercise regularly and use relaxation techniques and accept the support of your friends and family; studies show this helps recovery.

For more information about PTSD, ask at your local Self Care Pharmacy for a copy of the fact card. Call 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.