

REVIEW ARTICLE

WHOLE HEALTH FOR LIFE – A PROJECT AIMED AT REDESIGNING HEALTH CARE FOR AMERICAN VETERANS

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Summary

The Veterans Health Administration provides health care for 9 million American armed forces veterans every year. The system is currently undergoing transformation to personalized, proactive and patient-driven health care. One part of this transformation is called Whole Health for Life and is discussed in this article in greater detail with an emphasis on holistic approach and using some complementary and alternative methods, such as for example yoga. It could be inspiring for health care about both the veterans and patients with chronic health conditions in the Czech Republic.

Key words: veteran; health care; transformation; patient-centered care; whole health; yoga

Introduction

Military veterans form a specific group of people with specific health problems in every country. However, their specific needs are often not the focus of health care providers. Recently, a first review of the specific needs of individual groups of Czech veterans has been published and the outcomes can serve as a guide for planning nursing care for veterans (1).

The aim of our article is to contribute to the discussion about this problem by demonstrating how the Veteran care system in the United States (US) is changing its attitude to health care provided for veterans.

During a short study visit to the Veterans Affairs (VA) Hospital in Palo Alto, California, U.S.A. in August 2019, the author of this article had an opportunity to learn about one of several projects aimed at redesigning health care for American veterans – the Whole Health for Life. This project was a part of “Number one strategic goal” of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Strategic Plan for years 2013-2018 and continues in Strategic Plan for years 2018-2024 aimed at providing veterans with “... *personalized, proactive, patient driven health care to empower, equip, and encourage Veterans to take charge of their wellbeing and adopt healthy living practices that deter or defer preventable health conditions...A whole health system focuses not only on treatment, but also on self-empowerment, self-healing, self-care,*

and improving social determinants of health...This includes incorporating complementary and integrative health care practices to reduce addiction, manage chronic pain, and improve mental health and other conditions that respond well to these interventions..." (Strategy 2.1.4: Emphasizing veterans' and their families' whole health and wellness) (2).

We want to present this strategy and offer a new perspective on health care not only for veterans but also for all patients with chronic health conditions – the new perspective with an emphasis on holistic care and with integration of some alternative and complementary methods (CAM) that have been proven to have positive effects on health. We would also like to point out the two most inspiring parts of this ongoing project which could be applicable in health care in the Czech Republic – first, the bio-psycho-social approach, that is in line with the principles promoted by the Czech Society of Psychosomatic Medicine, and second, the use of yoga as a complementary method for the treatment of chronic pain conditions or mental health problems.

General information

The health care for veterans in the US is integrated in America's largest health care system - Veterans Health Administration (VHA). It provides care in 172 medical centers and 1069 outpatient sites of care serving 9 million enrolled veterans each year (3). Most of the health care here is covered by the VA health care benefit program. Eligibility for benefits is determined by a system of eight priority groups according to the level of service or non-service-connected disabilities, the time or type of active duty and according to their annual income. Veterans who do not have service-connected disabilities totaling 50% or more may be subject to co-payments for any care they received for non-service-connected conditions. Health care outside this system is paid for by commercial health insurance or paid directly by the patients.

The total veteran population in the US in 2015 was 20 million. It is interesting, that the prediction is declining to 12 million in 2045 (4). There is a different situation in the Czech Republic, where the total current veteran population is about 14 thousand, and the number is estimated to rise to 25 thousand by 2045 (5). Differences are also in providing health care, which is completely covered by the system of public health insurance and is provided free of charge by all health care facilities in the country including all three military hospitals - in Prague, Brno and Olomouc.

The need for change

In 2009 the Institute of Medicine stated in its report on Integrative Medicine and the Health of the Public that the health care crisis in the United States includes high costs that rise exponentially, and disappointing outcomes particularly in chronic diseases. The disease-driven approach to care has resulted in spiraling costs and fragmented health care system, and is inefficient and impersonal (6). The combination of increasing chronic conditions, greater number of service-related injuries among veterans and disease-driven care poses significant challenges to the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) as well. Together with a financial imperative there was a call for a complete redesign of the health care system.

Patient centered care

In 2011 the VHA established the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation (OPCC&CT) to drive the transformation of care to a personalized, proactive and patient-driven health care for veterans.

"Personalized care" means tailoring a person's health care to their individual medical conditions, circumstances, goals and values.

"Proactive care" means using strategies that strengthen the person's innate capacity for health and healing, such as mind-body approaches and nutritional strategies that are preventive, rather than reactive, such as surgery or chemotherapy.

"Patient-driven care" means that it is based on and driven by what really matters to the persons in their life; the patient is the head of their health care team, where clinicians provide the skills, resources and support to drive their own care (7).

The core of this type of care is creating the Personal Health Plan. Veteran and his health care team determine here what is most important for him and the best ways to achieve his personal goals. The pathway for it is discovering the person's mission, aspiration and purpose in a partnership with health teams, including peers, veterans and their families. Veterans can be then equipped with proactive complementary and integrative health (CIH) approaches such as stress reduction, mindfulness, yoga, tai chi, nutrition, acupuncture or health coaching to support their self-care and well-being. When needed, veterans are then treated by Whole Health Clinical Care that incorporates standard medical outpatient or inpatient care and CIH approaches based on the Veterans Health Plan. See Fig. 1.



Figure 1. Components of the Whole Health System (8)

Proactive health

While the Whole Health System outlines the way in which the VHA is bringing the new approach to the veterans, the practice of whole health is best illustrated by the Components of Proactive Health. See Fig. 2.

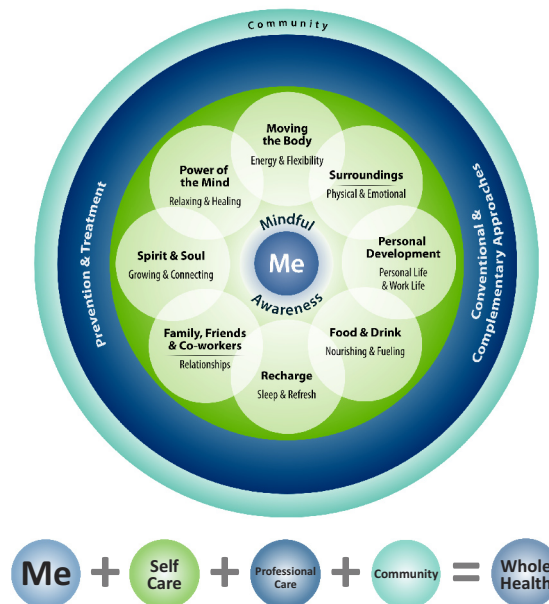


Figure 2. Components of Proactive Health (9)

This Circle of Health demonstrates the connection of one's health with other aspects of his or her life. In the center of the Circle is Me – only the patient knows his/her priorities, goals and values and it is important to be aware of it. Learning mindfulness helps realize patients' (veterans') motivations and emotions and to improve their handling. Around the Me are all the internal and external factors that influence one's health – the mind, emotions and spirituality, the body – its energy and flexibility, food a drink, the environment, family, relationships, and work life. All of them have an impact on the person's wellbeing and each of us has the power to change them – but we may not have the skills, willingness or support to make it happen. The first task of the health care team here is to teach the patients the skills and knowledge about self-care – how they can impact their health themselves. The following three steps play an important role in it: 1. Creating a personal health plan with the veteran, 2. Supporting the innate healing response through nutrition, stress management, movement and mindful awareness, 3. Learning about evidence-based non-pharmaceutical therapies that can involve the methods of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) such as yoga, tai chi, mindfulness, meditation or therapeutic journaling. An integral part of health care is, of course, the use of all available methods of conventional treatment – examinations, diagnostic tests, pharmaceuticals, surgeries, rehabilitation, etc. And finally, all these processes take place in the community of people the individual is in contact with - family, friends, coworkers, health care providers, etc.

Education of health care staff

The basic condition for making these changes is education of the health care staff and the clinicians especially in this patient-centered approach and in integrative therapies. The biggest challenge is a fundamental gap in much of professional health care education and this Whole Health model of care (7). To this goal, several courses have been created and are offered now for clinicians in the VA Health Promotion and Disease Prevention program.

The “Whole Health in Your Practice” course is a two-and-half-day program to help clinicians co-create a personalized health plan with veterans, collaborate with veterans to support the innate healing response through nutrition, stress management, movement and mindful awareness and learn about evidence-based non-pharmaceutical therapies.

The “Whole Health in Your Life” two-day course offers VA clinicians to directly apply the Whole Health approach to their own lives by focusing on their own health and self-care priorities and exploring various complementary and integrative health approaches.

The “Whole Health Coaching Program” is a six-day intensive course focused on coaching and communication skills for clinicians and Whole Health Coaches (10). Alongside these courses, a lot of comprehensive information or manuals are accessible on-line; the main one is the “Passport to Whole Health Reference Manual” created by J. A. Rindfleisch, Medical Director of University of Wisconsin Integrative Health (11).

Resources for evidence-based complementary approaches

The extensive use of complementary methods in the Whole Health model of care can be surprising. But these practices are often focused more on prevention and well-being and are aimed at strengthening the innate capacity to heal. Some of them can also be used for self-care. This is the purpose why they are offered alongside the typical conventional biomedical therapy. To promote evidence-based complementary practices, the project of evidence mapping has been launched, and as of now, about six “Evidence Maps” have been published – Acupuncture (12), Art therapy, Guided imagery, biofeedback and hypnosis, Massage for pain (13), Tai-chi (14), Telehealth services designed for women (15), Mindfulness (16), and Yoga (17). For clinicians they are accessible online at the pages of VA Health Services Research and Development (www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/reports.cfm) and besides that there are many other interesting reviews from the Evidence-based Synthesis Program, that help clinicians decide what CAM is more suitable for their patients.

Yoga as an example of the recommended methods

We chose one of these “maps” as an example - the Evidence map of yoga for high-impact conditions affecting veterans, which was completed in 2014 (17). The key questions of this review were about effectiveness and potential

adverse effects of yoga for low back pain, prevention of falls, mental illness (depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder - PTSD) and insomnia. To the date of the completion the researchers identified 9 systematic reviews and 23 unique RCTs; yoga for low back pain and for depression is studied most extensively. For these conditions the review concluded that yoga is associated with improvement in pain scores and back-specific disability and with improvement in depressive symptomatology. Very few adverse effects associated with yoga were reported. Applicability for veterans is limited because the studies involved mostly generally healthy, middle-aged women but not veterans.

But the research has made progress in the past few years: a new review on yoga for veterans with PTSD with positive results were published (18); one large study on yoga for veterans with chronic low back pain (LBP) also had the positive results (19), and one study about yoga for LBP in veterans is about to be published (20).

Yoga can also have a positive effect on a person in a spiritual sense, although it is not a religion. When it is practiced not only as a physical exercise, but also the moral and ethical principles and meditation are involved into the practice, then both self-awareness and awareness of the unity of oneself with the universe can improve.

Regular yoga lessons for veterans are offered in many VA hospitals and centers. A new way to deliver yoga to a wider range of patients via the video telehealth program was explored at the Palo Alto VA Health Care System. One group of participants attended yoga lessons in-person directly at the VA Hospital, and the second group participated remotely via the telehealth system. Finally there was no difference in outcomes between the two groups of participants, and they all reported high levels of satisfaction and improvement in symptoms such a pain, depression or anxiety (21).

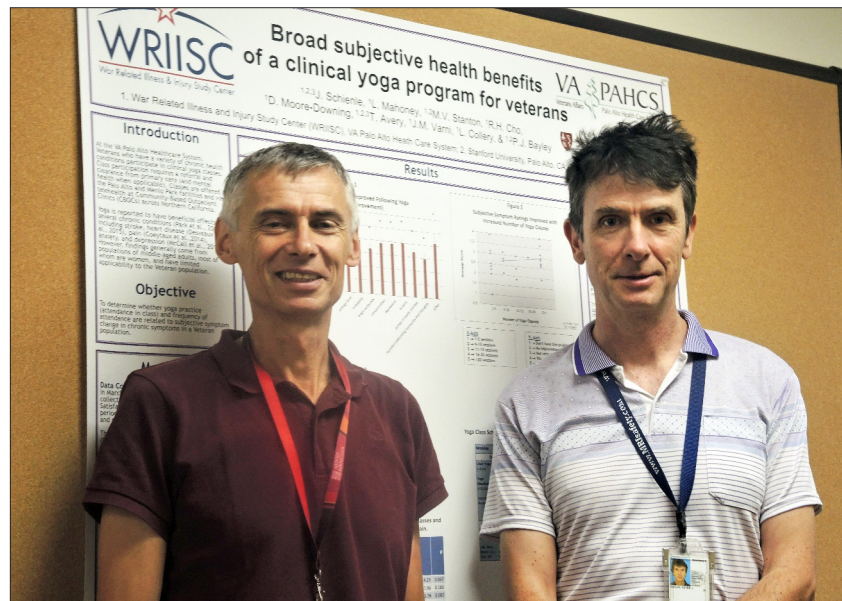
Short study visit

The main part of my short study visit in the United State took place at the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC), VA Palo Alto Hospital, California.



Figure 3. VA Palo Alto Health Care System

There I met with Dr. Bayley, Director of Research at WRIISC, and his team. I had the opportunity to discuss the Whole Health for Life project, yoga program for veterans, yoga research and telehealth yoga, especially.



And generally, it would be worth to study deeper this Whole Health model, so that we can say together with Krejci: "... through patient-driven care that embraces integrative approaches, veterans health will be better, their outcomes will improve, and the costs will be reduced."(7)

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Adherence to Ethical Standards

This article does not contain any studies involving animals performed by any of the authors. This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

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