

## **CONTRACTORS WORKING IN WAR ZONES UNAWARE OF MENTAL HEALTH RISKS**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Toronto, ON (May 19, 2009)** – While there have been a number of studies examining the psychological health of soldiers returning home from war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan, a new study is the first of its kind to take a closer look at the mental health of **contractors** working in war zones.

“Like soldiers, there is a significant number of contractors who suffer from post-traumatic stress when returning home from a war zone,” says Dr. Anthony Feinstein, lead investigator of the study and a neuropsychiatrist at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. “Our study shows that there is little in place to educate contractors on the psychological risks they may face in conflict zones and they are not receiving appropriate help when they return home.”

After seven years into a war in Afghanistan and five years into a war in Iraq, this study is the first of its kind to present empirical data on this particular group of individuals working in a war zone. It is estimated that up to 126,000 contractors are currently working in Iraq. Unofficial estimates put their death toll at a little over 1,000, with nearly 13,000 injured in the past six years. The average number of traumatic events faced by this group is double that reported by front-line journalists.

With the assistance of the International Contractors Association, the study, published in the April 2009 issue of the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, analyzed the psychological health of 79 contractors. The contractors surveyed were all men around an average age of 43, who typically spent more than half the year away from home working in the security field of a war zone. The majority of these contractors was based in Iraq and completed the study during their deployment.

The results of an online psychiatric assessment show that nearly a quarter of the contractors surveyed suffered from depression, 28 per cent experienced psychological distress, and 17 per cent engaged in excessive weekly alcohol consumption. A third of all contractors surveyed reported moderate to severe levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“In fact, our study notes that the depression and PTSD scores were the same regardless of where the contractor completed the survey,” says Dr. Feinstein, who is also a Professor with the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. “This means that the level of psychological health problems does not get better when contractors return home, at least in the first few months.

“Employers or organizations that hire contractors need to recognize this issue,” Dr. Feinstein adds. “That way, this particular group can receive the necessary support they require in order to recover.”

### **About Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre**

Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre is inventing the future of health care for the one million patients the hospital cares for each year through the dedication of its more than 10,000 staff and volunteers. An internationally recognized leader in research and education and a full affiliation with the University of Toronto distinguishes Sunnybrook as one of Canada’s premier academic health sciences centres. Sunnybrook specializes in

caring for Canada's war veterans, high-risk pregnancies, critically-ill newborns, adults and the elderly, and treating and preventing cancer, cardiovascular disease, neurological disorders, orthopaedic and arthritic conditions and traumatic injuries.

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