Written evidence submitted by Alison McDowell

- What are the challenges to accurately assessing the extent of mental health issues in serving armed forces personnel and veterans and how could government improve its understanding of those issues?

This is a group of people who are more frequently than not ‘high functioning’ and can easily answer ‘questionnaires’ provided by medical services in such a way as to avoid detection of problems. There is also a lack of understanding as to what a problem is – often people are suffering silently but not even aware that what they are experiencing is not commensurate with normal health. Similarly there is a lack of awareness or belief in the effectiveness of treatment options available. In order to make an accurate assessment there would need to be a much higher understanding within the proscribed population of exactly what feelings and experiences are in fact mental health problems, and how effective simple treatment therapies can be.

- What proportion of mental health issues in veterans is attributable to service in the Armed Forces and how well is this measured and understood?

Trying to assess this as a proportion is wasted effort. Each person is a sum of all their parts and experience, and should be seen as whole. There is no way to pin down what military experience may have contributed to a problem as and when it is identified. A similar experience would create completely different effect in one individual as in another.

In my personal experience, many people who join the military are already ‘running’ from unhappy experiences. The military should recognize that in offering good quality employment that includes safe accommodation, affordable food, and close knit relationships with colleagues, they often attract young people away from unhappy backgrounds. This is both a valuable lifeline and also a way of storing up problems for later in life. When the therapeutic benefits of being part of a close military community are suddenly withdrawn on cessation of service, there is no longer a safe way to experience or discharge feelings and patterns of behavior that were first created early in life. In short, even when military service can’t be seen to cause mental health issues, it can delay their manifestation and delay the development of appropriate coping mechanisms. It would be more useful to see military personnel as at higher risk of developing mental health issues and not try to gauge the extent to which service caused them.

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