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## Introduction

The recent tragic wartime injuries sustained by Bob Woodruff and Doug Vogt of ABC News puts a public face to what has been a silent epidemic in the U.S.: Traumatic Brain Injury.

The rate of combat-related traumatic brain injury among soldiers returning home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan averages 30%, according to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. This is 10% more than that of previous wars and can be attributed to blast injuries from improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Success in treating patients with traumatic brain injury means different things to different people. For the trauma surgeon, it means keeping the patient alive. For the hospital staff, it means the patient was able to be discharged. For the individual, however, it means returning to pre-injury levels of mental ability, thought processes, speech expression and motor coordination. Sadly, this is far more the exception than the norm.

## **What is a traumatic brain injury?**

A traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the function of the brain. Not all blows or jolts to the head result in a TBI. The severity of such an injury may range from "mild," i.e., a brief change in mental status or consciousness to "severe," i.e., an extended period of unconsciousness or amnesia after the injury. A TBI can result in short or long-term problems with independent function.

## **How many people have a traumatic brain injury in the United States?**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the 1.4 million who sustain a TBI each year in the United States:

- ♦ 50,000 die;
- ♦ 235,000 are hospitalized; and
- ♦ 1.1 million are treated and released from an emergency department.

The number of people with TBI who are not seen in an emergency department or who receive no care is unknown.

## **Traumatic brain injury in Operation Iraqi Freedom and in Operation Enduring Freedom**

As of January 14, 2006, the Defense Department reported 11,852 members of the military had been wounded in explosions - from improvised explosive devices (IEDs), mortars, bombs and grenades.

*Creating a better future through brain injury prevention, research, education and advocacy*

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More than 1,700 of those wounded in Iraq are known to have brain injuries, half of which are severe enough that they may permanently impair thinking, memory, mood, behavior and the ability to work. These individuals are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the number of soldiers who have actually sustained a TBI. Concussions may result from exposure to these explosions, crashes in the field, falls, etc. These injuries usually go untreated and uncounted. Thus we do not know how many soldiers have had concussions (mild TBIs) or are suffering from the consequences of these injuries as there is no routine screening for traumatic brain injury or its consequences. The effects of a TBI may not be immediately apparent but emerge over time as the person attempts to return to their routine or to participate in tasks or routines that are different or more complex. Thus the full effects the TBI the person sustained may not emerge until the soldier returns from the field or is transferred to another position. Medical treatment for brain injuries from the Iraq war will cost the government at least \$14 billion over the next 20 years, according to a recent study by researchers at Harvard and Columbia.

### **What are the consequences of a traumatic brain injury?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that at least 5.3 million Americans currently have a long-term or lifelong need for help to perform activities of daily living as a result of a traumatic brain injury. Because the brain is complex, every brain injury is different.

Some symptoms may appear right away. Other symptoms may not show up for days or weeks. The usual effects of TBI involve cognitive and behavioral functioning. Motor functioning, including balance, coordination and strength, may also be affected, as well as sensation and perception. The natural course of recovery after TBI often begins with a period of unconsciousness or altered consciousness, followed by a period of confusion and amnesia (post-traumatic amnesia) and then, after confusion resolves, a period of gradual improvement in cognitive functioning. Depending on the type and severity of injury, the duration of these periods may vary and the extent of recovery of various resulting problems may differ. For instance, persons with mild TBI may have altered consciousness of just seconds or minutes; those with more moderate or severe injuries may be unconscious for hours, days or weeks. The natural course of some injuries may take years to fully evolve. Sometimes the injury makes it hard for people to recognize or to admit that they are having problems. A traumatic brain injury can cause a wide range of functional changes affecting thinking, sensation, language, and/or emotions. A brain injury may cause problems with:

- ♦ Cognition (concentration, memory, judgment, and mood)
- ♦ Language (word finding problems, slurred or rapid speech)
- ♦ Movement abilities (strength, coordination, and balance)
- ♦ Sensation (touch, taste, smell and vision)
- ♦ Emotion (stress, frustration, mood swings, inappropriate behavior)

According to a study led by Corrigan JD, Whiteneck G, and Mellick D ( Perceived needs following traumatic brain injury)) in 2004, about 40% of those hospitalized with a traumatic brain injury had at least one unmet need for services one year after their injury. The most frequent unmet needs were:

- ♦ Improving memory and problem solving;
- ♦ Managing stress and emotional upsets;
- ♦ Controlling one's temper; and
- ♦ Improving one's job skills.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Woodruff, Mr. Vogt and 30% of our injured service men and women are now members of an Association they never wanted to join - the Brain Injury Association of America. Most TBIs involve life-long consequences for the individual and their families in the quest to restore brain and physical function to pre-injury levels. Post-hospitalization, these individuals rely heavily on community-based treatment centers to receive the multiple therapies needed to assist them. Additionally, the cost of obtaining these essential services can push a family to the brink of bankruptcy.

### **About the Brain Injury Association of America**

Founded in 1980, the Brain Injury Association of America (BIAA) is the leading national organization serving and representing individuals, families and professionals who are touched by a life-altering, often devastating, traumatic brain injury (TBI). Together with its network of more than 40 chartered state affiliates, as well as hundreds of local chapters and support groups across the country, the BIAA provides information, education and support to assist the 5.3 million Americans currently living with traumatic brain injury and their families.

If you or someone you love has sustained a brain injury, please call the Brain Injury Association of America at 1.800. 444.6443 for information and resources and/or visit, [www.biausa.org](http://www.biausa.org).

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