Clinical commissioning groups are responsible for the commissioning of health services for veterans, reservists and service families registered with NHS GPs in their area. Despite this, there is evidence that GPs are unsure of how many of these individuals are registered with their practice and more guidance is needed on how to meet the health needs of these patient groups. Furthermore, there is a need to improve the identification and coding of these individuals, with a linked aim of further increasing the understanding of their health requirements and improving their care and treatment.

To help address this issue, the Royal College of General Practitioners is working with NHS England and NHS Improvement to accredit GP practices as ‘veteran friendly’. This is just one of several initiatives being undertaken to improve NHS care for the Armed Forces community (which includes serving personnel, regulars and reserves, veterans and their families).

If you are interested in being part of this scheme sign up for free to start the process.

The veteran population
A veteran is someone who has served in the British Armed Forces (Regular or Reserve) for at least one day. Veterans also include any member of the Merchant Marine who has served in a war zone. This includes crew from convoys in World War 2 and more recently in the Falklands conflict and Gulf Wars. There are around 2.4 million British Armed Forces Veterans in Great Britain, of whom 89% are male and 60% are aged 65 and over. In the South East it is between 8% - 10% of the population who are from the Armed Forces community.

About 18,000 service people move back into civilian life every year and whilst most of these individuals have similar levels of health to the general population, around 2,000 leave on medical grounds. The top reasons for medical discharge are for issues relating to back, knees, mental health and hearing.

Becoming a veteran friendly accredited practice

In summary, accreditation consists of five elements:

1. Ask patients registering with a surgery if they have ever served in the British Armed Forces.
2. Code it on the GP computer system. We recommend using ‘English’ rather than Read codes as these vary according to which computer system is used. Having changed the Read codes available and removed derogatory codes such as ‘dishonourable discharge’, we recommend that the term 'Military Veteran' is used. It is therefore very simple.
3. Have a clinical lead on veterans in the surgery. This should be a registered health care professional, but could be a nurse or paramedic, not just a GP.
4. This clinical lead is required to undertake dedicated training, attend NHS Armed Forces network meetings, stay up to date with the latest research and innovations and ensure that the practice is meeting the health commitments of the Armed Forces Covenant. They should also be available to provide advice to colleagues, as well as possibly seeing veterans themselves.
5. Eligible practices should have a CQC 'good' rating or higher.

Accreditation lasts 3 years.

Whilst this is a voluntary initiative, this is set out as a key commitment in the NHS Long Term Plan, which states: ‘To ensure all GPs in England are equipped to best serve our veterans and their families, over the next five years we will roll out a veterans accreditation scheme in conjunction with the Royal College of GPs.’

Being accredited means that a practice can better identify and treat veterans, refer them, where appropriate, to dedicated NHS services (such as the Veterans' Mental Health Transition, Intervention and Liaison service (TILS), the Veterans’ Mental Health Complex Treatment Service (CTS) and the Veterans Trauma Network) and capture better epidemiological data to improve future health provision. It also means that the NHS is better able to meet the health commitments of the Armed Forces Covenant, whereby the Armed Forces community, including veterans, should face no disadvantage in accessing health services and should receive priority care for military attributable conditions, subject to clinical need.

Accredited practices are provided with an information pack to help increase their understanding of the health needs of veterans and services available to them and to promote accreditation. Accreditation is currently open to GP practices in England.

For further information, please email veterans@rcgp.org.uk or call 020 3188 7649

Or for local support and resources, contact scdt.admin@nhs.net or visit www.sussexarmedforces.nhs.uk or kentandmedwayarmedforcesnetwork.nhs.uk

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2 https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/
3 https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/
4 https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/