

board for PTSD, a neck injury and hearing loss, without considering why he still has headaches and short-term memory loss.

Michele Paulson's husband, a first sergeant who asked that his name not be used, was knocked out by an IED, and pieces of shrapnel forced their way into his temple. He was not scanned for a brain injury, said Paulson, who now works as a TBI technician.

He suffered short-term memory loss, angry outbursts, dizziness and vision problems. But he was not counseled or treated for the TBI, and was sent back to work before he felt ready. He still suffers short-term memory loss.

The big picture

David Cifu, who oversees the Traumatic Brain Injury program at the VA medical center in Richmond, Va., said treating TBI patients as if they're making up their injuries is about the worst way to take care of them.

The longer diagnosis and treatment are delayed, the harder such care can be. "Sometimes the

layers are so significant we can't peel them away," Cifu said.

The Defense Department is working to better educate doctors about that issue, Jaffin said.

The Army announced in mid-July the launch of a "chain teaching" awareness program to "educate more than 1 million ... soldiers within 90 days about post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries."

Barbara Sigford, director of the VA Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Service, said VA also has begun "looking at the big picture." When treating a veteran with a missing limb, for example, health professionals note how a TBI may make walking with a prosthetic device more difficult.

Jaffin said he and other TBI specialists have met with top Pentagon health officials to discuss what else should be done. Some actions are in motion, such as putting out word on how to care for the top 22 TBI symptoms, and sending pamphlets to Iraq and Afghanistan so units as well as medical personnel understand the issues better.

Such care should expand to families, he added, noting spouses can serve as early warning alarms for behavioral changes.

"The doctor may not detect it in someone he's meeting for the first

time," Jaffin said. "That's something we need to teach people. ... That's really important."

Cloudy future

"My wife has been taking it hard," Santiago said at the fast-food restaurant. "We get into a lot of arguments."

After a particularly bad fight, he said, his wife of 17 years had gotten a restraining order.

"I'm married to two different people now — the one I fell in love with, and the one who came back from the war," Stacy Santiago said a few days later.

She said the house has to be spotless because of Jose's new obsessive-compulsive disorder.

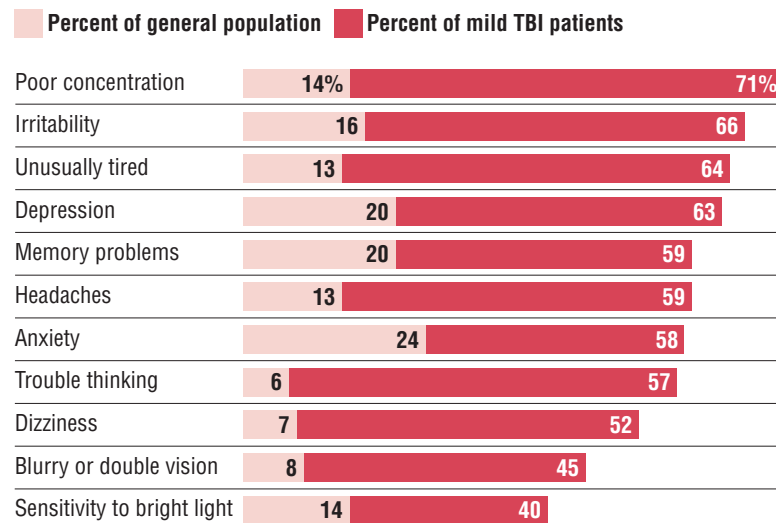
"You want to really freak him out? Leave a fork in the sink," she said, chuckling. "His memory is shot. He'll call, and call back 10 minutes later and ask the same question."

Santiago initially went to the Traumatic Brain Injury Clinic at Walter Reed, but when his neurophysiologist accused him of not trying hard enough on cognitive tests, he asked for another doctor. That's when he was sent to VA.

VA diagnosed him with PTSD, OCD and cognitive problems. He began seeing a speech pathologist to help with his stuttering and attended group therapy.

POST-CONCUSSION SYMPTOMS

Post-concussion symptoms, while sometimes seen among those who have not suffered a concussion, are far more frequent in people with mild traumatic brain injury:



Source: Veterans Health Initiative

CHRIS BROZ/STAFF

He still has shaky days, but feels better now that the gadgets VA gave him — personal digital assistant, global positioning system and beeper — help him keep his life under control. And the VA counseling he is getting also helps.

He and Stacy are on good terms now, but she said it's still difficult — enough so that she wonders

how long she can last.

"There are days when I go, 'Give me the divorce papers.' And there are days when I say, 'Wow, this is a good day.'"

That it took over three years to reach a place where good days are possible still makes her angry.

"They told him it was all in his head," she said.

"Ask the people he lives with." □



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