



THE ROYAL BRITISH LEGION GULF WAR GROUP MINUTES

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Meeting of the Gulf War Group – 9 May

Present:

Lord Morris, Lord Tyler, Brigadier Garnett, Shaun Rusling and Maria Rusling (deputising for Dr Hall from the NGVFA), Colonel Cummings, Professor Malcolm Hooper, Patrick Leavey, Dr Everest, Frances Hoy, Cathy Walker, Commodore Toby Elliot, Sue Freeth (Chairman) and Lisa Wise (Secretary).

In attendance: Jonathan Iremonger and Christine Paxton (MOD observers).

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from the Rt Hon Mr Michael Mates MP, Dr Hall, Professor Simon Wessely, Ms Hillary Meridith, Ft Lt John Nichol and Maj Christine Lloyd.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the last meeting were signed as a true record of the meeting.

3. Matters Arising

The Group noted the action points paper circulated with the agenda. There were no other matters arising.

4. Parliamentary update

The Rt Hon Lord Morris of Manchester updated the group on parliamentary activity since the last meeting. In particular, issues concerning pension levels and appeals were covered.

The Group noted that they were now receiving comprehensive updates on parliamentary activity. Much of the activity of late had been in reference to medical treatment and unresolved individual cases. It was noted that the continual delays in PAT cases were concerning veterans, as the outcomes had implications for others.

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The Group also noted the Legion's recent parliamentary survey. Highlighted was the finding that 71% of parliamentarians felt that more needed to be done to support Gulf War veterans.

The issues of closure was again being discussed at Westminster. It was stated that both Lord Craig and Lord Lloyd has been in contact with Ministers recently. However, it was also felt that the latest response from the Government did not take the position any further forward. There was particular concern that the letter from the Minister for Veterans in October failed to address ongoing concerns.

Commodore Elliot thanked Lord Morris and other Members of Parliament for their ongoing support. He also stated that Combat Stress were continuing to press for further funding to support their ongoing clinical work. It was noted that mental health trials with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the National Health Service (NHS) were to begin soon. The demand on services from Combat Stress was continuing to increase, and only around 2% of new cases were War Pensioners, and therefore, attracted Government funding.

There was a short discussion on the continued use of the 2003 Medical Research Council (MRC) report. The Group highlighted the fact that the report was now four years old, but continued to be reported both in letters from the Minister and in parliamentary answers. The MoD observer stated that the reason for referring to the report was that it was a milestone, particularly in relation to the move toward more rehabilitation based studies.

Ms Cathy Walker asked Lord Morris for his opinion on what would constitute closure for veterans. Lord Morris stated that the report of the independent public inquiry headed by Lord Lloyd had put forward one route; and both Lord Lloyd and Lord Craig – as former Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) throughout the Gulf War – had been seeking meaningful dialogue on closure with MoD Ministers, but as stated above, were still no further forward.

5. Outline of the Gulf War Seminar

The Chairman outlined the events planned for the Gulf War Seminar that was due to begin after the meeting. She stated that the Group was privileged to have General Sir Peter de la Billière chair the seminar and thanked him for agreeing to take part.

The Group also noted that the Minister for Veterans would be making the keynote speech, and that he would be both taking questions from the floor and staying over the lunch break to talk to veterans.

6. Policy Statement Approval

The Secretary gave a short explanation to the approval matrix that had been circulated with the agenda. She stated that were there was general agreement on a change then an amendment had been made. However, there were some comments that were made by individuals that did not have the support of the Group, and had therefore been excluded. The matrix circulated outlined where amendments had been made, as well as where suggestions had not been included. Professor Malcolm Hooper expressed concern that the document still did not specifically mention multi-symptom illnesses.

Lord Tyler wished to record the appreciation of the Group for the production of the policy document. The Group stated that the document should become a “living” document and be updated regularly to include scientific updates. It was stated that the Executive Summary should act as a document for parliamentarians.

The Group also noted that the policy document would probably not bring about closure, and that that the expectations of veterans needed to be managed. However, it was felt that the document would give back some momentum to the issue, and let veterans know that they had not been forgotten.

It was highlighted that many Members of Parliament continued to feel that society had not done its duty to Gulf War veterans. Mr Rusling stated that if parliamentarians thought that veterans were going to give up that they were very much mistaken – he also stated that younger veterans were now coming forward to lend their support.

7. Research

7.1. Rehabilitation Study

The MoD stated that the draft proposal for a rehabilitation study had been put to the MRC for an informal view, and that they were awaiting comments. The MoD would inform the Group of any developments. The Group noted that considerable “buy-in” from veterans would be needed if the study was to be successful.

7.2. Research Funding

The MoD were asked to comment on the availability of funding for future research. The MoD stated that there was a budget for research but that this was not fixed. Mr Jonathan Iremonger stated that all research had to be judged on its merits and had to represent “value for money”. If the MoD received a recommendation that research should go forward from the MRC there would be no reason why this should not be possible i.e. if a research proposal had scientific merit, funding should not be an issue.

It was also noted that the MRC had recommended further research into organophosphates and paraoxonase. However, the only research proposal that had been received did not represent good “value for money”, and therefore, alternative proposals were being sought.

7.3. Gulf War Group Research Proposals

The Secretary reported that the MRC had been sent the Group’s research proposals, but that a response had not yet been received. Professor Malcolm Hooper reported that he had also not yet received any confirmation of other sources of funding.

8. Date of the Next Meeting

The next meeting would be held on 11 September at 11am.