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Y Gweinidog dros Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Minister for Health and Social Services

Our ref: MB/EH/1229/09

Your ref:

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10th December 2009

Dear Gareth,

During Questions to the First Minister on 1 December you raised concerns about the provision of healthcare services for armed forces and veterans. The First Minister promised that I would write to you regarding the points you made.

As the First Minister stated in his response to you, hospitals dedicated to treat serving personnel who are injured on duty are based in England, and they the responsibility of the UK Government and Ministry of Defence medical services. Under the previous arrangements for the Reception of Military Casualties (RAMP), the proposal was that major hospitals across the UK would take it in turn to receive casualties from any theatre of operations. Now, however, Selly Oak and Queen Elizabeth at Birmingham are the single receiving hospitals for casualties. All major treatment is carried out at Birmingham (Royal Centre for Defence Medicine) and patients transferred for specialist care (such as neuro and orthopaedic rehabilitation/limb fitting) to Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre Headley Court, or discharged to a Regional Rehabilitation Unit for ongoing physiotherapy.

Therefore whilst armed forces policy is not devolved, health services are, so we are using powers in health to help improve the lives of those discharged from army on medical grounds and those of veterans generally. I outline below some of the work being undertaken by the Welsh Assembly Government in this area:

Veterans and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

We are committed to supporting and treating veterans with PTSD across Wales. They can access services through GPs and local community mental health

services. More specialised treatment is also available through the NHS Traumatic Stress Service at University Hospital Wales (UHW).

The evidence is that the vast majority of cases of PTSD can be treated by local services in an outpatient setting, which what most people and their families want. Veterans, and all people who access mental health services, will benefit by the Welsh Assembly Government's determination to ensure that the quality and availability of services improves over the next three years. As a fundamental part of the new integrated local NHS bodies, mental health services will have a strengthened presence across the NHS to the benefit of all service users.

Community Veterans Mental Health Service Pilot

In February 2008 I launched a two-year pilot project called Community Veterans Mental Health Service. This is part of the Traumatic Stress Service based at UHW, Cardiff and is led by Dr Jon Bisson, a veteran and internationally renowned expert in PTSD. The pilot costs £135,000 and is jointly funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and the MoD. The pilot project is currently identifying the level of veterans' need and most appropriate model of delivery for addressing these needs, part of which is to ensure that the health needs of veterans are able to be met within mainstream NHS services.

It is one of six centres in the UK to take part in a two-year pilot scheme for the treatment of veterans with PTSD, and provides services to areas covered by the former Cardiff & Vale and Cwm Taf NHS Trusts. The majority of veterans referred live within these areas but individuals have been referred from outside the catchment area. While the Service is based at the UHW Cardiff, individuals have been referred from outside the catchment area.

Referrals have been received from various sources including self and family referrals, mental health teams, the Service Personnel and Veterans Agency, Combat Stress, and GPs. Treatment options include the commissioning of services offered by Combat Stress, a charitable organisation to which the Welsh Assembly Government contributes annual grant funding.

Veterans' Health Needs Research

In order to complement this pilot and provide extensive survey data to inform the development of future mental health services in Wales for veterans, I also recently commissioned a Veterans' Needs Assessment Research project, led by Dr Jon Bisson of Cardiff University, to identify the level of veterans' health needs in Wales.

Veterans' Mental Health Task & Finish Group

I also asked Dr Bisson to set up and Chair a national Task and Finish Group that will compliment and enhance the work that is underway through the pilot project and the needs assessment research. This will involve both statutory and non-statutory representatives and consider the wider mental, physical and social needs of veterans, gathering evidence outside the scope of the pilot. Following their report being delivered to me, I will consider whether the planned model of service is effective and should later be rolled out across Wales. I am keen to ensure that there is no gap in service provision between the end of the pilot scheme and the adoption of the national model.

Veterans' Priority Healthcare and Treatment on the NHS

On 23 November 2007, I announced that all service veterans will be entitled to priority NHS treatment and care for service-related conditions, extending the current priority access to NHS services from war pensioners to all veterans. A Welsh Health Circular (WHC) has been distributed to NHS Trusts, LHBs, GPs and other health-related bodies in order to clarify the extension of priority treatment to veterans.

Prosthetic Limb Provision

The MoD Command paper states that the NHS as a minimum match the standard of provision to injured personnel by the Defence Medical Services. The Welsh Assembly Government has provided Health Commission Wales (HCW) with a direct allocation to enable the Artificial Limb and Appliance Service Centres to meet this need. HCW provides the funding on an individual patient commissioning basis and on a retrospective basis in order to mitigate any potential delay.

Longer Term Rehabilitation and Life Care Planning

Spinal injuries and neuro-rehabilitation services for Wales are provided by Rookwood Hospital in the South and by the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt service in Oswestry for the North. In the context of veterans the role of these services would be in longer term rehabilitation.

HCW Needs Assessment for War Veterans

A draft scoping document relating to a possible needs assessment for war veterans is being considered by HCW. The purpose of the needs assessment will be to:

- predict the increase in future demand on health services over the next 5 years arising from former armed service personnel;

- predict the financial/budgetary requirements necessary to meet this additional demand

The precise range of health needs and services to be included in the needs assessment will need to be defined but will include the type of longer term rehabilitation service provided by Rookwood and the Welsh Artificial Limb and Appliance Services together with the needs that may arise related to traumatic brain injury.

HCW and the NHS will work closely with the MoD/Defence Medical Service to complete the review.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'L. M.', written in a cursive style.