

The Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is a blood born virus, that is estimated to have an incidence of 1.4% to 19 % of the Viet Nam Era Veteran population^(1,2,3). It is a major health concern **of Veterans**. These Veterans feel strongly, that the pneumatic guns used before, during, and after the Viet Nam Era was their sole source of exposure to HCV. They felt that the magnitude of this issue was not readily recognized by the Veteran's Administration. On September 29, 2006, an announcement was issued from Headquarters, Departments of the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Coast Guard- Washington, DC,

"The use of the **same unsterile nozzle and fluid pathway** to inject consecutive patients ... were usually refilled quickly from attached multi dose vaccine vials... These devices remain unapproved and will not be used."4

This announcement was a springboard for renewed interest by Veteran's to file for "service-connected disability related to the pneumatic guns" during military service. When I began to gather data starting in 2001, I too had hopes to provide support to many of my patient's who felt very strongly that they were in this group of Veterans with a service connected hepatitis c infection.

This investigation demonstrates the incidence of HCV positive anti-body testing from 2001 to 2006 in Columbia, Missouri a rural Midwestern VA hospital. All HCV positive veterans were interviewed. Potential risk factors for blood exposure by veterans consulted to the clinic were investigated. The list factors reviewed, included blood transfusions, gamma globulin injections, intravenous and nasal drug abuse, tattoos, fist fighting (6), combat exposure, on the job injury, and other sources such as household exposure. All patients were provided, three 45 minute visits for education and counseling. During this process, visits were used to gain trust, in a relaxed, and non-judgmental atmosphere to encourage more forthcoming information.

There were 8052 patients tested for Hepatitis C with a total of 395 identified with HCV positive antibodies. This was a rate of 4.9% infection with HCV, consistent with some studies, but lower than others. For geographic comparison, the infection rate was compared to data

from a non-profit organization, Missouri Hepatitis C Alliance. Those screened were from the same geographic area as Veterans at this clinic. During 1/2005-5/2007, 1846 Mid Missouri residents were educated, screened, and tested (5). It was found that 593 (29.6%) were HCV +. The major difference, was the average age of those infected, being 24 years of age. In this study, the risk factors were identified as IVDU (%), nasal drug use %, tattoos %.