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## **DOD Using Virtual Reality for PTSD Treatment**

Jessica Maxwell | Army News Service

May 05, 2010

A humvee slowly drives down a dusty road in Afghanistan and seconds later, an IED explodes off to the right, causing the windshield to crack and the driver to swerve.

Time to press the restart button.

At a demonstration Thursday, guests at the National Press Club saw first-hand the capabilities of virtual reality in treating soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Defense Department's Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury have begun a pilot program that uses multi-sensory virtual reality to treat soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder. The program enables doctors to choose a scenario, customized around a soldier's personal experience.

Brig. Gen. Loree K. Sutton, director of the program, said she is very hopeful in the use of virtual reality but notes that no one approach will reach out and touch everyone.

"We owe these young Americans our very best," Sutton said. "We know the issues of post-traumatic stress, these unseen wounds of war. If left in silence, they can be the deadliest wounds of all."

Sutton said medical specialists are constantly learning more about treating PTSD and TBI, and how these injuries fit into other types of injuries from war.

"It requires an integrative, team-oriented, inter-disciplinary approach that puts on a par the physical, psychological, moral and spiritual wounds of war," Sutton said. "That's our challenge."

Sutton said it is key to continue breaking down the stigma of seeking help. She said servicemembers must realize that reaching out is an act of courage and strength.

"Stigma is a toxic, deadly hazard that keeps our troops from reaching out," Sutton said.

Dr. Greg Reger, acting chief for the Defense Department's National Center for Telehealth and Technology, Innovative Technology Applications Division, said the virtual reality program can be customized, down to details such as IED attacks, convoys and environment.

Reger explained that when an individual encounters something dangerous, a survival program kicks into action, which involves remembering things seen, heard and smelled, and the emotions and responses to the event. Reger said these associations live together and when encountered, the survival program reacts, causing anxiety. The natural human response is to avoid future encounters.

"The problem is that it provides short-term comfort, but in the long-run, people give up large portions of their very meaningful life in order to just manage their anxiety," Reger said.

Reger explained the traditional approach to treatment is exposure therapy, which involves the individual (with the guidance of a doctor) confronting the anxiety issues, instead of avoidance.

"A servicemember would come into my office (after a few sessions), close his or her eyes and tell me about the event that is still troubling them," Reger said.

He said research has shown that individuals that have a high level of emotional engagement respond best to treatment. To increase emotional engagement, virtual reality enables servicemembers to confront these issues, which activates the memory and potentially, treats PTSD.

"Treatment works and it's getting better all the time," Sutton said. "The earlier we can intervene, the better."