

Media release

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**Clinical
Oncological
Society of
Australia**

Cancer incidence higher in Australian Korean war veterans

Australian Korean war veterans have a significantly increased cancer incidence and mortality than the general population, according to a study by the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Study author, Dr Keith Horsley, presented the findings today at the Clinical Oncological Society of Australia's Annual Scientific Meeting in Canberra, the largest gathering of cancer experts in Australia.

Dr Horsley and his team found Australian Korean war veterans had a cancer mortality rate 21 per cent higher than the general Australian population.

"We identified a number of factors that are likely to have contributed to the increase, one of which is cigarette smoking, which was extremely prevalent in troops at the time of the war," Dr Horsley said. "Charities would distribute cigarettes to the troops for free and they were encouraged to smoke."

Dr Horsley said although it was impossible to quantify, other factors thought to have contributed included pesticides, excessive alcohol consumption, combat stress and a "less than ideal diet and lifestyle" following the troops' return from war. Further research looking at some of these was currently being analysed.

The study also produced interesting results when comparing the army, navy and air force servicemen. Army and navy veterans had a 25 per cent higher cancer incidence rate than the general population, whereas the opposite was true of air force veterans who were 10 per cent less likely than the general population to be diagnosed with cancer.

"This type of difference between the services is not unheard of," Dr Horsley explained. "As a group, the air force is more highly trained and it was suggested in our study that cigarette smoking in the air force is not as prevalent as in the army and navy.

"Charities didn't distribute cigarettes to air force servicemen in the same quantities as the other two services and generally speaking smoking is restricted on RAAF bases for safety reasons linked with fuel storage. There is also no evidence to suggest air force servicemen consume more alcohol than the general public; however both army and navy servicemen have been shown to drink more."

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