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courier-journal.com

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2009

USPS 135567

VETERANS' HEALTH

Brain injuries prompting seizures

U of L epilepsy center sees patients increase

By Chris Kenning
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The Courier-Journal

Two years ago, Army Staff Sgt. Gerald Esposito was taking a shower in a remote base in Iraq, about to go on patrol, when a mortar attack knocked him unconscious, fracturing his skull in two places and taking his right eye.

He woke up in a hospital in Germany three days later to punishing headaches, dizziness and memory loss. He had suffered a traumatic brain injury, one of the signature injuries of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the epileptic seizures that have dogged him since have been among his



Gerald Esposito, who has a traumatic brain injury, leaves Veterans Hospital with his fiancée Elaine Agan.

By Pam Spaulding,
The Courier-Journal

most difficult symptoms, making it impossible for him to work and barely able to provide for his three children.

"The worst part is the stress because I can't support my family," said Esposito, 35, who lives in Shepherdsville.

Esposito is among a growing number

of veterans being treated at the University of Louisville's epilepsy center, reflecting an emerging nationwide rise in brain injury-induced epilepsy among veterans, according to medical experts.

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VETS | Brain injuries prompt seizures

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"We're seeing the increase," said Dr. Christopher Shafer, a neurologist at the center, which tests and treats veterans referred by the VA Hospital. "In some cases, the injuries they're surviving now they wouldn't have survived in past wars."

Pentagon doctors this year estimated as many as 360,000 U.S. troops have suffered wartime brain injuries, mostly from concussions as a result of roadside bombs and other explosives — about 20 percent of the 1.8 million soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While most heal without treatment, an estimated 45,000 to 90,000 troops suffer more severe symptoms, from headaches and mood changes to memory problems, according to the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.

Roughly 25 percent to 50 percent of traumatic brain injuries lead to epileptic seizures that become a lifelong illness. And because those seizures sometimes don't begin until years after the injury, the full impact of the problem might not be fully visible for a decade.

"This will be a real problem in the future," said Shafer, who couldn't provide statistics but said center doctors have already noticed a rise.

While a range of drugs, surgery and nerve stimulators control seizures in more than half of patients, the unpredictable seizures can cause anxiety, job loss, inability to drive and family

TO LEARN MORE

For more information and resources, visit the Epilepsy Foundation of Kentucky's Web site at www.epilepsyfoundation.org/local/kentuckiana. Information about brain injury can be found by visiting the Brain Injury Alliance of Kentucky at www.biak.us.

disruptions. For some vets who are already suffering from post-traumatic stress, it may be especially debilitating.

On Friday — two days after Veterans Day, and as epilepsy awareness month is marked nationwide — the Brain Injury Alliance of Kentucky plans to hold its seventh annual "Brain Ball" to benefit its wounded warrior program for military troops with brain injuries. Kentucky National Guard officials are expected to attend to highlight the issue, said Lt. Col. Kirk Hilbrecht, a guard spokesman.

"We estimate if the wars would end today, we'd have 5,000 soldiers knocking on doors in this state asking for support from brain injuries," said Melinda Mast, executive director of the Brain Injury Alliance.

For Esposito, the injury that sent him home was the worst, but not the first, concussive injury. Over the course of three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, where his jobs ranged from patrols to serving with a medical company, he'd survived several roadside bomb blasts.

The injuries at first seemed like "nothing serious," he said.

After the mortar attack in

January 2007, he was discharged but battled migraine headaches. His seizures abated, and he eventually began working as a Louisville-area paramedic. But recently, a return of his seizures made work impossible.

He turned to the University of Louisville's epilepsy center for help and tests, and a new combination of drugs.

For now, he's trying to get Social Security and food stamps so he can support his three kids. He's not sure when he'll be able to marry his fiancée, Elaine Agan, herself a veteran who had a portion of her leg amputated after a car accident before she was to be deployed. The two met at an event at Fort Knox.

"I help him remember his doctor appointments, and his medication, but he does extremely well," Agan said as she sat in a small Veterans Administration hospital waiting area with Esposito, his head bowed in pain.

Esposito, a New York native, said he is nervous about his future but hopes doctors will "find the right meds" so he can get back to his life.

Debbie McGrath, executive director of the Epilepsy Foundation of Kentuckiana, said such cases are only likely to grow in the region and around the nation, as war vets return with brain injuries that eventually induce epilepsy.

"Unfortunately, we know this is going to be an issue that many military men and women will be facing," she said.

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