



VIETNAM VETERANS' FEDERATION
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Incorporating
Vietnam Veterans Peacekeepers and Peacemakers Association NSW Branch
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Vietnam Veterans Federation ACT Branch
Vietnam Veterans Federation Victorian Branch
Vietnam Veterans Federation South Australian Branch
Vietnam Peacekeepers Peacemakers Federation of Tasmania
Vietnam Veterans, Peacekeepers and Peacemakers Federation of Australia WA
Branch

Dear Presidents,

Rewarding Illness?

Some senior officers of the Department of Veterans Affairs and Defence have a new way of looking at those being compensated for war-caused illness and injury; these senior officers say we are being 'rewarded for illness'.

The promise of this reward, it is suggested, actually 'causes' illness or at least causes an exaggeration of it and that receiving compensation 'causes' illness to persist.

In other words, they are claiming that veterans are scamming illness or degree of illness so we can stop work and get and keep our hands on compensation.

We have had twenty seven years experience of advising sick and troubled veterans at our Sydney (Granville) headquarters and round Australia. In that time thousands of veterans have come to us for help. It is our overwhelming experience that those who have come to us have done so reluctantly. Often, veterans have been dragged to our office by their worried and wearied wives or have arrived at our doorstep only after dramatically 'hitting the wall'. Not infrequently, the veteran has 'hit the wall' a number of times before seeking our help, each time changing his job and hoping for the best. In most cases the veterans could have and should have stopped work and sought help and compensation years earlier; their strong desire to remain in the workforce preventing them from doing so. This reluctance to cease work has often damaged their health and the health of their families.

The assertion that compensation 'encourages' veterans' illness finds no support in our long experience. Indeed, we suspect the idea springs from the mind of an economic fundamentalist with a primitive view of human motivation and with no practical experience of sick veterans.

'Compensation', these fundamentalists believe should be completely replaced by 'rehabilitation'. Indeed, one very senior Department of Veterans Affairs bureaucrat has

told us that almost all disabled war veterans can and should be rehabilitated into paid employment.

This claim shows a dangerous misunderstanding of war-caused disability.

There are some 18,000 Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Vietnam veterans. Of these a high percentage suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is notoriously resistant to treatment.

Our long experience suggests PTSD comes in three categories. A few sufferers will respond to treatment and be cured. At the other extreme, there will be quite a few who are doomed to a nightmare of a life, even institutionalisation, whatever the treatment. The bulk, whilst their condition is not curable, can be treated and counselled to manage their condition more or less successfully.

It is this later group that the Department's economic fundamentalists think are being kept 'ill' by their receipt of the TPI pension. Surely, they argue, there must be some menial, un-stressful, paid jobs for which PTSD sufferers can be trained.

They are mistaken. Paid employment requires predictability. The employer must be able to predict with reasonable accuracy when his employee will turn up for work. As those with practical experience know, PTSD sufferers are unable to provide this predictability; days of feeling able to work and days of almost complete dysfunction, occurring randomly.

Ex-service organizations like ourselves that are manned mainly by volunteer TPI pensioners know that these volunteers, despite their good intentions, may not be able to turn up. We understand that at any time of the day they may simply have to get up and go home. We understand that, at any time, a TPI volunteer may announce that they need a couple of weeks break and that, regardless of their intention, may not be well enough to return at the end of that fortnight. Our office can have no inflexible deadlines and only very flexible expectations. And that's with TPI pensioners well enough to do some voluntary work. That is the reality. PTSD sufferers as employees are simply not a commercial proposition.

Expecting these disabled veterans to undertake rehabilitation with a view to rejoining the paid workforce would be futile. But worse, it would damage their health. The thought of having to re-shoulder the stress of the workplace including the strong expectation of regularly turning-up would send many into breakdown and some to suicide.

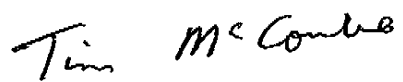
What must be done with most PTSD sufferers is to first remove the horror of actual or impending financial collapse with financial compensation, then offer them voluntary rehabilitation of a different kind; not work-related rehabilitation but the kind of rehabilitation that encourages them to emerge from isolation and despair and participate in society as much as their disability will allow.

We agree with the offending senior bureaucrats that more resources are needed for rehabilitation, but much of those resources should be devoted to disabled war veterans *after* they are granted compensation. Indeed compensation should be seen, for many, as a *vital part* of their rehabilitation.

The offending senior departmental officers are wrong about veterans' motivation and they are dangerously wrong in claiming work-related rehabilitation is a universal solution.

Their preaching should cease.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tim McCombe". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tim McCombe
President