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GERONTOLOGY PROFESSORS JOIN FORCES TO HELP WOUNDED WARRIORS



Record numbers of soldiers are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with serious spinal cord injuries (SCI). While medical advancements can help heal their physical wounds, little is known about how these veterans re-engage with their communities and rebuild meaningful lives.

"How do they transition back to family and community life and adjust to their physical impairments? How do they reconfigure their homes, their work and their lives?" asks Cathy Lysack, professor of occupational therapy and gerontology.

Lysack and Mark Luborsky, professor of anthropology and gerontology, are co-principal investigators on a new \$456,000 grant from the Department of Defense to explore those questions.

The three-year grant, shared between WSU's Institute of Gerontology and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, will study how service members and veterans with SCI reintegrate into society. Luborsky believes "the time is ripe to discover how military personnel with SCI create a sense of connection."

"After the medical issues are stabilized, the key to long-term success for patients is how they establish their cultural identities and create meaningful connections to communities," he says. "This project will move the science and research forward toward interventions to help all people with SCI maintain their independence and ability to function in community life."

A total of 60 spinal cord injured veterans will be recruited at three levels of recovery: less than 12 months, 12 to 24 months, and 2 to 5 years after discharge from inpatient rehabilitation. The research teams will interview service members in depth about their long-term goals, values and expectations for meaningful community reintegration and social participation.

"Traumatic spinal cord injury is severe and permanent, but it need not be a catastrophic disability," says Lysack. While researchers have learned a lot about how civilians with SCI reintegrate into family and community life, veterans and service members may approach it much differently.

"These are soldiers - uber males and females - whose role in the military has been to fight and protect," she says. "We need to learn how they make a successful transition to civilian life."



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