

D

DETAILS

N

NEWS

A

AWARDS

VOLUME III

## FOCUS on Research

### Whole Health Research May Provide Treatment Answers for Opioid Crisis

As a physician and clinic director with the San Francisco VA Health Care System, Dr. Karen Seal strives to treat patients holistically, as opposed to focusing narrowly on a disease or symptom.

For scores of Veterans who suffer chronic pain – usually with other ills from the physical and mental wear and tear of military service – promoting whole-person wellness is especially crucial.

Current treatments for chronic pain often rely on opioids, which have limited efficacy, are addictive and could cause a host of severe complications. Many experts agree that reliance on opioids has fueled what is now a national crisis.

As a researcher, Seal leads a new national study on Whole Health approaches that include interdisciplinary teams of pain care professionals, personalized health planning, peer coaching and evidence-based complementary and integrative models to manage pain in Veterans.

“With the current opioid epidemic, there is increasing recognition that pain care requires a multi-modal biopsychosocial approach,” said Seal, a scientist supported by the Veterans Health Research Institute – NCIRE. She also is a UCSF professor of medicine and psychiatry and director of the Integrated Care Clinic for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans and the Integrated Pain Team Clinic at the SFVAHCS.

Last fall, she was awarded several million dollars from the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH),

part of NIH, to lead a six-year demonstration project that aims to implement a new Whole Health model for chronic pain care and improve overall functioning and quality of life in Veterans.

The project is part of a joint initiative of the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), focusing on non-drug approaches for pain management.

“Finding solutions for chronic pain is of critical importance, especially for military personnel and Veterans who are disproportionately affected,” said NIH Director Francis S. Collins, MD, PhD, in announcing, last September, 12 national projects that are part of NIH-DoD-VA Pain Management Collaboratory. “Bringing the science to bear through these real-world research projects will accelerate our search for pain management strategies for all Americans, especially as we work to address the nation’s opioid crisis.”

Chronic pain is one of the most prevalent problems among Veterans, striking 50 percent of men and 75 percent of women Veterans. For those with post-traumatic stress, it’s even worse – up to 80 percent of Vietnam Veterans and 50 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans with post-traumatic stress are diagnosed with chronic pain.



*Karen Seal, MD, MPH  
Integrated Pain Clinic*

