



Research on veterans: A PubMed-based bibliometric analysis from 1989 to 2018

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Abstract

Background: Military veterans (veterans, in short), due to their unique military experience, face a variety of health issues either unique to their service or more common than the general population. This study aims to achieve a better understanding of the publications focused on veterans from 1989 to 2018 using a PubMed-based bibliometric analysis of research articles on veterans.

Methods: We searched the PubMed website for publications in journal article category from 1989 through 2018, indexed with the MeSH descriptor, "Veterans" or "Veterans Health". Recorded articles were retrieved and analyzed.

Results: During the period 1989-2018, there were 12 710 articles related to veterans or veterans' health, up from 66 articles in 1989 to 1225 articles in 2018. Of all the selected articles, 5242 (41.24%) can be classified under research support by the US government, 2773 (21.81%) by non-US government, and 1700 (13.38%) by the Office of Extramural Research (OER) of the National Institutes of Health. Of the 15 most prolific authors, 14 were affiliated with the US institutions. The journal that published the highest number of articles related to veterans was the journal *Military Medicine* (504 articles, 3.97%), followed by the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* (397 articles, 3.12%), *Psychiatric Services* (Washington, D.C.) (299 articles, 2.35%), and *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development* (279 articles, 2.20%). Among all publications, 18.04% (n = 2293) were published in journals of psychiatry, followed by 13.51% (n = 1717) of psychology and 7.71% (n = 980) of neurology.

Conclusion: Publications related to veterans increased significantly from 1989 to 2018. A considerable number of the publications were in journals of psychiatric and psychological categories. However, most publications were descriptive of US veterans. Future research related to veterans in Taiwan deserves further exploration to provide a reference for prioritization of the health care and policy making.

Keywords: Bibliometrics; Mental disorders; Military psychiatry; Veterans; Veterans health

1. INTRODUCTION

A military veteran (veteran, in short) is a person who has served and is no longer in the service of the military.¹ In Britain, veterans refer to those who have served in the army of the British Empire or Commonwealth Armed Forces. In 2000, there were 13 million veterans or 219 for every 1000 people in Britain.² In the United States, a veteran is a person who has served in the armed forces and has been discharged under conditions other than dishonorable.³ As of 2017, there were around 21 million American veterans.⁴ In Taiwan, the term veterans mostly refer to provincial veterans who moved to Taiwan decades ago along with the government after fighting in the Anti-Japanese War or the Chinese Civil War. However, it also refers to those who have

completed 10 years of active duty or become physically or mentally handicapped during military service. At the end of March 2018, there were approximately 371 000 veterans in Taiwan.⁵

Owing to their contribution to wars and dedication to duty, veterans receive special treatment from governments. Many countries have a special department for veterans' affairs (VA) to handle the issues related to their well-being, such as re-employment, medical care, and pension for widows and orphans. VA-supported hospitals are usually the primary choice for veterans seeking medical care, especially in countries where universal health insurance is not widely available. With medical advances, warfare in recent times tends to yield more survivors with injuries who in previous wars would have died of their injuries. Veterans also face difficulties in the process of transitioning from the military into civilian life owing to their unique military culture. This may include values, ethics, hierarchy, rituals and ceremonies, selfless duty, code of conduct, implicit communication patterns, and the habit of following orders, which have led to the perception of the veterans owning a subculture.^{6,7}

There have been abundant publications in various fields that have focused on veterans. However, only a few studies have integrally explored the research articles of this uniquely experienced group. This study aims to achieve a better understanding of the publications focused on veterans from 1989 to 2018 using a PubMed-based bibliometric analysis of research articles on veterans.

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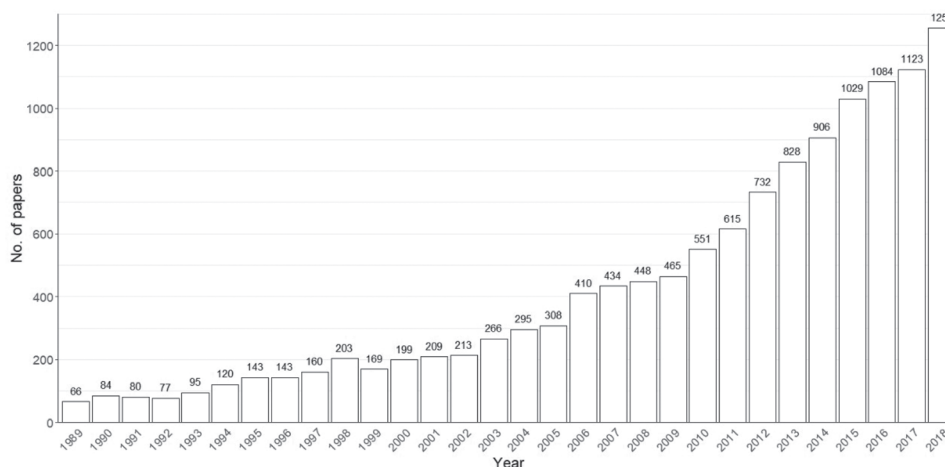


Fig. 1 Number of published papers related to veterans from 1989 to 2018.

2. METHODS

We searched the PubMed website (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>) on June 26, 2020. PubMed is a free resource supporting the search and retrieval of biomedical and life sciences literature available to the public online since 1996.⁸ PubMed was developed and is maintained by the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), which is part of the US National Library of Medicine (NLM), a branch of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). MEDLINE, which was created by the US NLM, is a premier bibliographic database of journal articles, including literature published since 1966. While the PubMed database contains over 30 million citations and abstracts of biomedical literature, MEDLINE contains over 26 million references to journal articles in life sciences with a concentration on biomedicine. A distinctive feature of MEDLINE is that records are indexed with NLM Medical Subject Headings (MeSH). The MeSH includes a comprehensively controlled vocabulary of hierarchical structures used to index journal articles in MEDLINE/PubMed and facilitates the search for biomedical and health-related information.^{9,10}

We searched for publications indexed with the MeSH descriptor “veterans” or “veterans’ health” in journal article category. The MeSH entry term “veterans’ health” was introduced in 2011.¹¹ Its concept covers the physical and mental conditions of veterans. The previous indexing was “veterans” (1963-2010), which related to former members of the armed services.

In addition, we restricted our search to articles published between 1988 and 2018. In the case of some journals, their print issues are published later than their online version (eg, journals in e-journal format were published in 2018, whereas their paper-based version was released in 2019). We excluded the articles with the date of print publication after 2018 or before 1989. We did not extend the search to 2019 because the MeSH update was more comprehensive through the end of 2018.

Considering it may be difficult for many foreign readers to read if Chinese references are marked in Citation, we restricted our analysis to English-language publications in the PubMed database.

All the records obtained were checked to make sure that each article was “MeSH indexed” so that it could be used as a benchmark for analysis.

We used Microsoft Excel 2019 to convert and calculate data. The results were presented as “descriptive statistics,” including frequency and percentages.

3. RESULTS

While searching the PubMed database on June 26, we identified 13 754 journal articles related to “veterans” or “veterans’ health” during 1989-2018. Among them, 12 710 articles included abstracts and were distributed in 1550 journals.

The Fig. 1 shows the annual number of publications. We found that the number of articles increased from 66 to 1255 during 1989-2018. In the initial 5 years, between 1989 and 1993, <100 articles were published in a year. Since 2010, over 500 articles were published annually, and since 2015, this number has been >1000 every year. In the last three decades, the number of relevant studies increased 19-fold. If we further differentiate by 10-year interval (1989-1998, 1999-2008, 2009-2018), the number of published articles roughly tripled in each decade (the number of the articles rose from 66 to 203 in 1989-1998, 169 to 448 in 1999-2008, and 465 to 1255 in 2009-2018).

Table 1 shows the category of publication of articles related to “veterans” or “veterans’ health.” It is possible that each article was classified in more than one category. Of all the selected articles, 5242 (41.24%) can be classified under research support by the US government, 2773 (21.81%) under research support by non-US government, 1700 (13.38%) under research support by the Office of Extramural Research (OER) of the NIH, and 666 articles (5.24%) under research support by Public Health Service (PHS) of the US government. Out of 12 710 articles filtered from PubMed database, 1491 (11.73%) were comparative studies, 842 (6.62%) were randomized controlled trials, and 543 (4.4%) were studies that were conducted across multiple centers.

An article has usually more than one author. The selected 12 710 articles were contributed by 28 188 authors. Fifteen most prolific authors published 1456 (11.46%) articles (Table 2). Out of the 15 most prolific authors, 14 were affiliated with the US institutions. Only one author (Solomon Z, ranked ninth) was from an Israeli institution.

Table 3 lists 15 journals in which these articles were most frequently published. Of them, the journal that published the highest number of articles related to veterans was the journal *Military Medicine* (504 articles, 3.97%), followed by the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* (397 articles, 3.12%), *Psychiatric Services* (Washington, D.C.) (299 articles, 2.35%), and *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development* (279 articles, 2.20%). These four journals (only 0.26% of the total 1550 journals) accounted for over one-tenth (11.64%, 1479

Table 1
Publication type of the articles related to “Veterans” or “Veterans Health”

Publication type	Articles published	% of 12 710
Research support, US Govt, non-PHS	5242	41.24
Research support, non-US Govt	2773	21.82
Research support, NIH, extramural	1700	13.38
Comparative study	1491	11.73
Randomized controlled trial	842	6.62
Research support, US Govt, PHS	666	5.24
Multicenter study	559	4.40
Review	512	4.03
Clinical trial	334	2.63
Observational study	217	1.71
Evaluation study	203	1.60
Validation study	164	1.29
Systematic review	71	0.56
Controlled clinical trial	53	0.42
Research support, NIH, intramural	45	0.35

Extramural = the Office of Extramural Research (OER) at NIH; Govt = government; intramural: the Office of Intramural Research (OIR) at NIH; NIH = USA National Institutes of Health (NIH); PHS = the United States Public Health Service (USPHS).

Table 2
The most prolific published authors who submitted articles published from 1989 to 2018

Author	Articles published
Rosenheck RA	170
Rosenheck R	140
Beckham JC	122
Justice AC	120
Yano EM	96
Tsai J	88
Pietrzak RH	87
Solomon Z	86
Frueh BC	82
Schnurr PP	82
Southwick SM	80
Valenstein M	77
Calhoun PS	76
Rimland D	76
Pugh MJ	74

articles) of the total articles published (12 710). Moreover, over a quarter (25.45%, 3235 articles) of the total articles were published by 15 leading journals. Seven of these 15 leading journals are related to mental illness, psychiatry, or psychology. They include the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *Psychiatric Services* (Washington, D.C.), *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, *Psychiatry Research*, *Psychological Services*, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, and *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

Table 4 shows the number of published papers in different research fields in terms of “Broad Subject Terms for Indexed Journals” of PubMed, from 1989 to 2018. It shows that 18.04% articles on “veterans” or “veterans’ health” were published in the journals on psychiatry, followed by 13.51% articles in the journals on psychology. The other leading journals in which these articles were published were related to neurology (7.71%), military medicine (7.61%), health services (6.43%), physical and rehabilitation medicine (5.57%), medicine (5.08%), substance-related disorders (4.44%), public service (4.29%), and geriatrics (4.04%).

Table 3
Top 15 journals with the most articles related to “Veterans” or “Veterans’ Health”

Journal name	Articles published	%
<i>Military Medicine</i>	504	3.97
<i>Journal of Traumatic Stress</i>	397	3.12
<i>Psychiatric Services</i> (Washington, D.C.)	299	2.35
<i>Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development</i>	279	2.20
<i>Federal Register</i>	219	1.72
<i>Medical Care</i>	209	1.64
<i>Journal of General Internal Medicine</i>	206	1.62
<i>The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease</i>	165	1.30
<i>Psychiatry Research</i>	161	1.27
<i>Psychological Services</i>	149	1.17
<i>Journal of The American Geriatrics Society</i>	144	1.13
<i>Journal of Clinical Psychology</i>	112	0.88
<i>American Journal of Public Health</i>	107	0.84
<i>Journal of Affective Disorders</i>	102	0.80
<i>PLOS One</i>	91	0.72
Others	9475	74.55
Total	12 710	100

Table 4
Number of published papers in different research fields according to the PubMed subject category, from 1989 to 2018

Broad subject terms for indexed journals	Articles published	%
Psychiatry	2293	18.04
Psychology	1717	13.51
Neurology	980	7.71
Military Medicine	967	7.61
Health Services	817	6.43
Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine	708	5.57
Medicine	646	5.08
Substance-Related Disorders	564	4.44
Public Health	545	4.29
Geriatrics	513	4.04
Behavioral Sciences	461	3.63
Nursing	450	3.54
Psychophysiology	369	2.90
Epidemiology	324	2.55
Internal Medicine	310	2.44
Biomedical Engineering	289	2.27
Therapeutics	283	2.23
Health Services Research	277	2.18
Jurisprudence	248	1.95
Gastroenterology	230	1.81

4. DISCUSSION

The literature on “veterans” and “veterans’ health” has increased significantly in the past three decades, especially in the last decade (Figure). We can see the expanding trend from the annual growth in the number of published articles, which was <100 until 1993 and under 400 until 2005, but it was >1200 in 2018. As an article could be funded by different research supporting programs, in our study, we could not identify the exact proportion of the articles funded. However, a high percentage (at least over 40%) of these articles have received sponsorship from the US government. Table 1 demonstrates that veterans’ health has been an important issue in the United States. Thus, it was not surprising to find that many of the articles were published by the US organizations (hospitals, universities, and

research institutions). This might also explain why the vast majority (14/15) of the 15 highest published authors were from the US organizations (Table 2). Thus, the Veterans Affairs (VA) Research and Development program in the United States focuses on improving veterans' well-being through basic and clinical health services besides rehabilitative research on health issues affecting veterans. In fiscal 2019, because of dynamic collaborations with university partners, other federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private industry, 3611 principal investigators carried out VA-related research on 7372 active funded projects (including VA funding and other sources). Furthermore, the congressional appropriation set for VA medical and prosthetic research in fiscal 2019 was \$729 million and total research budget (including other VA and non-VA sources, such as NIH) was \$1.96 billion that helped authoring or co-authoring of 11 279 published research articles by VA investigators.¹² We manually searched and reviewed the background information on the authors of the most published articles and learned these authors' research and publications were not limited to veterans' studies. They were not fixed affiliated at Veterans Affairs hospitals, either.

Among 12 710 articles published in 1550 journals, four most published journals accounted for more than one-tenth of the articles, and 15 leading journals further accounted for more than a quarter of the articles (Table 3). Nearly half of the 15 most published journals were related to mental health, psychology, and psychiatry. They indicated a concentration trend in the journals in which these articles were published, and many of the articles on veterans were related to mental illness. A similar trend can also be noticed in Table 4, which shows that >30% of the total articles were published in journals in the fields of psychiatry and psychology.

In a previous survey of 4.46 million veterans, a quarter of them reported one or more mental illnesses of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorder (SUD), anxiety disorder, or serious mental illness (SMI, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder).¹³ Compared with the prevalence of mental illnesses in general population, where nearly one from five adults was affected (19%), their prevalence in veterans was higher.¹⁴ The prevalence of each of the five mental health conditions was also higher than their known estimates in general population from other epidemiological studies.^{15,16} Over 1.7 million veterans received the treatment in a VA mental health specialty program in the fiscal year 2018.¹⁷

There are two reasons for a high prevalence of mental illnesses among veterans. First, the higher prevalence of these diseases among veterans might relate to their unique experience in combat and military culture.⁷ For example, studies have found that in past years, PTSD affected approximately 3.6% of American adults while the disorder's prevalence among veterans rose from 13.5% to as high 20% to 30% among combat veterans, although figures have varied widely across wars and eras.¹⁸⁻²⁰ However, the study in which overall 13.5% of study participants screened positive for PTSD showed, simultaneously, that more deployed veterans screened positive for PTSD (15.7%) than nondeployed veterans (10.9%).²⁰ Some military experiences were related to some kind of mental illness, for example, the typical type of a veteran affected by PTSD was male, from the Army or Marines, and a lower ranked officer.²¹ In addition, while only 17% of combat troops are women, 71% of female military members develop PTSD because of sexual assault experienced within the ranks. Thus, PTSD in soldiers does not occur exclusively as a result of combat.²²

The second reason relates to the integrated medical care system by VHA to veterans in the United States. Most primary care from mental health services in the United States has remained fragmented. Conversely, VHA conducts a well-developed system

for integrated mental health assessment and management. Mental illness is often combined with many other medical conditions and increases the risk for several other medical conditions, such as hypertension and asthma, arthritis, and cardiovascular disease.^{21,23} Veterans with mental illnesses have a high utilization of the VA system (over 91%). It is more likely that the disease would be discovered.²³

We might wonder whether there were differences in health patterns between veterans in VA medical facilities and veterans in non-VA healthcare facilities. However, the utilization of medical facilities by veterans in different countries is not consistent. In the United States, ex-servicemen or women who meet the criteria for the veterans can receive government concessions at a VA medical facility. Some of them may also be treated in other public or private healthcare facilities. In the United Kingdom, both veterans and the citizens are treated in medical facilities under the National Health Service (NHS). Besides, many of the publications collected in our study were cross-institutional. This made it difficult to distinguish which healthcare facility each veteran was treated in and to further compare the difference of disease patterns between veterans treated in VA medical facilities and veterans treated in non-VA medical facilities.

This study had some limitations. First, we searched the PubMed database for articles related to veterans or veterans' health by MeSH and identified 12 710 articles. This process might lead to underestimation of publishing of the total number of articles related to veterans. The studies that focused on veterans but were not specifically mentioned in the article would be left out. However, provided other settings remained the same, the direct search for "veterans," instead of using a MeSH search, would yield 112 747 records. This would wrongly include the articles unrelated to veterans but published by affiliations like veterans' hospitals. Despite the discrepancy between the number of articles recorded and the actual number of articles, we preferred the MeSH search with less sensitivity but higher specificity.

Second, the number of the articles in each research field would be underestimated, as the name of the journal or broad subject terms for indexed journals were used to estimate the attributive category (research fields) these articles belonged to. The articles related to psychiatric diseases are not limited to those published in journals in the field of psychiatry.

For example, in our study, PTSD-related articles have been published in psychiatric or psychological journals, as well as in journal, such as *Occupational Medicine, Journal of Military Medicine, International Journal of Yoga Therapy, and Journal of Religion and Health*. Taking this into account, the number of articles regarding mental illness and psychiatric or psychological problems in veterans might be more than the number that we found.

Third, the author's name in the database includes the last name along with the initial of the given name. This may result in some confusion. Some journals publish the author's names, including initials of their first name and the middle name. Other journals publish the author's name with only the initial of the first name. Therefore, in case of the names such as Rosenheck RA and Rosenheck R, it would be difficult to know whether the names belong to the same author or two different authors. On the other hand, two authors having the same family name and the same initial of the given name may be mistaken for the same person. The above situations require a manual comparison of the authors' articles and affiliations to ascertain their identity.

Fourth, the increase in the number of publications over the past three decades has been because of the increase in the volume of research on veterans. In addition, the number of journals in the database is increasing each year. With the popularity and availability of electronic publications, it is also easier and more

complete than ever before for PubMed database to comprise all areas of the publications. We could see from the statistics on the website of PubMed, total citations in PubMed were about 23 million (including 20 million from MEDLINE) in 2014, and about 30 million (including 26 million from MEDLINE) in 2019. But only about 0.3 million citations from MEDLINE in 1996. Moreover, the refinement required to conduct index search is also increasing year by year. These factors have contributed to the growth of publications to some extent. Although the extent to which the two factors contribute is difficult to distinguish in our study, we cannot ignore the persistence of veteran health-related issues. If the topics were irrelevant, or increasingly rare, the number of relevant publications was likely to decline.

In conclusion, we can see an increasing trend in publications related to “veterans” or “veterans’ health” from 1989 to 2018. Through PubMed-based bibliometric analysis, our research provides a picture of focus on “veterans’ health.” Most of the publications were descriptive of the US veterans, and these publication to some extent provided guide to innovative mental health programs throughout the US VA system and had impact on health for all.²⁴ Future research related to veterans in Taiwan deserves further exploration to provide a reference for prioritization of the country’ health care and policymaking.

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