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Returning wounded soldiers to meaningful civilian lives

DETROIT – Record numbers of soldiers are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with serious spinal cord injuries (SCI). Medical advancements can help heal their physical wounds, but 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? How do they adjust to their physical impairments? And how do they reconfigure their homes, their work and their lives?” asked Cathy Lysack, professor of occupational therapy and gerontology at Wayne State University. Drs. Lysack and Mark Luborsky, professor of anthropology and gerontology at Wayne State University, 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 said. “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,” said 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 said. “We need to learn how they make a successful transition to civilian life.” The goal of this study is to support the development of innovative strategies and systems that will improve the long-term outlook for service members with traumatic injuries and their families. “This is not about managing a disability,” Lysack said. “It’s about rebuilding a life.”

The Institute of Gerontology researches the aging process, educates students in gerontology, and presents programs on aging issues relevant to professionals, caregivers and older adults in the community (www.iog.wayne.edu). The Institute is part of the Division of Research at Wayne State University, one of the nation’s preeminent public research institutions in an urban setting. For more information about research at Wayne State University, visit <http://www.research.wayne.edu>.