



Hon. Johnny Isakson
Chairman
Senate Committee
On Veterans Affairs
Russell 131
Washington D.C.

Hon. Jon Tester
Ranking Member
Senate Committee
On Veterans Affairs
Hart 311
Washington D.C.

September 23, 2019,
Re: Sept. 25 Hearing On Impact of Toxic Exposures on Veterans

Dear Senators Isakson and Tester,

I am writing on behalf of the Blinded Veterans Association. The members and national officers of our organization look forward to the hearing planned for September 25 to consider the adequacy of the VA's process for determining which illnesses and medical conditions will be presumed result from toxic exposures during military service. This is a timely issue for our nation's veterans and their families. We wish to thank you and the other members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs for looking into this matter. We would also like to call your attention to one area where we believe VA's current process is failing veterans in alarming numbers.

There is growing evidence that appears to demonstrate a link between exposure to toxic substances such as Agent Orange and the development of eye cancers. VHA has been very reticent to release data on the prevalence of such cancers among veterans enrolled in VA's healthcare system, but the available data indicates that between 2007 and 2010, Vietnam era veterans exposed to toxic substances during their service in the Armed Forces have been diagnosed with a particular form of eye cancer known as Choroidal Melanoma (CM) at the rate of 2,000 per year. While CM is the most common primary malignant intraocular tumor and the second most common type of primary malignant melanoma in the body, it is still very rare in the general civilian population, with occurrences of only 5-6 per one million people. Demographic reports in the U.S. indicated there was a total of 1,000 new cases of eye cancer diagnosed in 2010. If Vietnam Era Veterans developed eye cancer at the same rate as the general population there should have been about 115 veterans diagnosed with this form of cancer. However, among veterans within the VA system in 2007, there were just fewer than 2,000. In 2008, there were just over 2,000 cases diagnosed, about 2,200 in 2009, and about 1,550 cases in 2010.

Family members of veterans impacted by this form of eye cancer often waited years for VBA decisions and appeals, for a review of possible links between CM and exposure to toxic substances. Furthermore, VA didn't respond to BVA's requests for more data on the rates of diagnoses of eye cancers among enrolled veterans from 2000 to 2017 while denying claims of those with this form of eye cancer. We feel that the processes must include reviews by

independent outside medical epidemiological experts in making decisions on if probably toxic exposure caused a cancer pattern to emerge.

VHA's lack of responsiveness has led us to question the objectivity of the VA's process. We urge you and the other members of your committee to thoroughly scrutinize this process and insist that it be evidence-driven; rigorously applying accepted standards of evaluation. We further encourage the committee to examine how VHA determines which medical conditions to review for potential links to toxic exposures working with Academy of Science.

BVA would like to see further cooperative research by VA, DoD, and the National Eye Institute into the particular potential correlation described at the beginning of this letter. We urge both the members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs and the Veterans Health Administration to further support evidence-driven research on Agent Orange and other toxic substances that our servicemen and women have been exposed to and the medical side effects of such exposure.

Thank you very much for your consideration of our concerns and for your continuing efforts to ensure that our nation's veterans get the medical care and benefits they need and deserve.

Respectfully,
Dr. Thomas Zampieri
President and Chairman