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## Local VA helps some vets with alternative medicine

By Carol Ann Alaimo , Arizona Daily Star

Nontraditional practices such as hypnosis, acupuncture, meditation, biofeedback and native healing ceremonies have become so common that the Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities are now paying closer attention to the trend.

The Iraq veteran in George Gafner's Tucson office had a problem that confounded his doctors and his wife: Since returning from the war, he was impotent, for no reason that medical science could detect.

Gafner, a therapist at the city's veterans hospital, suggested **hypnosis** to see if the soldier's unconscious mind might yield a clue.

In a dimly lighted room, with flute music playing in the background, the young man leaned back in a recliner, closed his eyes and counted backward, drifting into a dreamlike state.

"Does your problem have anything to do with Iraq?" Gafner asked. The young man answered yes by wiggling a finger, then mumbled an odd combination of letters: "IED . . . IUD."

Deciphering that comment solved the soldier's problem, Gafner said.

It turned out that his wife had an IUD (intrauterine device for birth control). And his unconscious mind was associating that with an IED, or improvised explosive device — the top killer of troops overseas, Gafner said.

"After that, his impotence cleared up."

The Tucson VA Medical Center is one of many U.S. veterans hospitals tapping the mind-body connection to treat chronic pain, insomnia, combat-related stress and other disorders.

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Alternative medicine "is an area of intense interest among the general population, and veterans are no exception," said Dr. Stephen Ezeji-Okoye, head of the VA Field Advisory Committee on Complementary and Alternative Medicine, set up last year to look at the effectiveness of such practices.

In a 2002 survey of veterans hospitals nationwide, Ezeji-Okoye said, about 84 percent of respondents said they offered one or more nontraditional therapies. The Tucson hospital offers three: **hypnosis**, biofeedback and the services of an American Indian healer.

The proliferation of such practices is not without concern, Ezeji-Okoye said. Many have little scientific proof of effectiveness, and some aren't regulated by licensing authorities, he said.

Still, committee members are “keeping an open mind,” said Ezeji-Okoye, who spent a month in China as a medical student observing Eastern practices such as acupuncture.

The advisory group will make recommendations to the VA on which practices are working and what kind of staff training is needed to protect patients.

Among Tucson veterans, there’s no shortage of believers.

Former soldier Donald Rayos was one of first on the scene of a widely publicized air tragedy in 1982, when an Air Florida jet crashed into a bridge near the Pentagon and plunged into the Potomac River. Memories of the carnage helped fuel a long battle with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Rayos, 50, said hypnotherapy has helped him cope with his raw nerves, raging outbursts and tendency to avoid others.

“It takes the edge off,” he said. “It helps me soften my memories and set them aside, even though you never forget.”

Gafner, a licensed clinical social worker and director of family therapy training at the Tucson VA, is a believer, too. He has been practicing hypnotherapy there for more than a decade.

He agrees there isn’t much hard proof of its effectiveness. Little research exists, he said, because results are hard to measure when conditions vary so much among patients.

Of the 200 to 300 patients he hypnotizes each year, more than half say it helped them to some degree, Gafner said.

Army veteran Lance Dickinson, a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, said **hypnosis** helped alleviate decades of suffering from rage, alienation and “terrible, screaming nightmares” linked to his wartime service.

Dickinson, 61, also takes part in American Indian ceremonies at Tucson’s VA.

The hospital has a contract with a traditional Indian counselor, sometimes referred to as a medicine man, who stresses Indian beliefs about the links between mind, body and spirit, registered nurse Yvonne Garcia said. She is the hospital’s advocate and case manager for American Indian veterans.

Sometimes the healer lays his hands on patients. Or he may burn sage, tobacco or sweet grass. Such activities are done in addition to modern medical treatments, Garcia said.

The Tucson hospital also holds Indian “talking circles,” in which a stone or feather is passed clockwise around a group as members speak one by one. Dickinson said taking part in those sessions has taught him compassion for others and for himself.

“The native people are very accepting and forgiving,” he said. “And that has helped me to accept and forgive myself.”

Did you know?

What is now known as the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System was established nearly 80 years ago, on Oct. 13, 1928.

Today, its network of facilities and programs serves 150,000 veterans in eight counties across Southern Arizona and in western New Mexico.

Its flagship site is the Tucson VA Medical Center, a complex of pink buildings at 3601 S. Sixth Ave., just north of Ajo Way. The 283-bed hospital often is highly rated in patient surveys.