

OPINION

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TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY

Give survivors, families appropriate therapy, support

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If a silver lining exists to the debilitating injury suffered by ABC News anchor Bob Woodruff, it is that traumatic brain injury (TBI) survivors now have a face. TBI has been called the "silent epidemic" because it is the leading cause of death in America for persons ages 1 through 44 — not cancer or heart disease, as may be commonly perceived.



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Unlike other severe, life-altering injuries, this condition may not be immediately evident in a survivor's appearance or physical capabilities. Bob Woodruff's all-American good looks and public persona belie the challenges that, by his own account, he and his family face daily.

For too long, the impact of TBI on

America's families, including our war veterans, has been largely underestimated. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, of the reported cases of TBI, at least 5.3 million Americans currently have a long-term or life-long need for TBI-related care. Walter Reed Army Medical Center reports that more than 62 percent of wounded soldiers returning from Iraq have sustained a TBI.

Recent data show that approximately 1.4 million people sustain a TBI each year in the United States. Of those, 50,000 die (10,000 of them children), 235,000 are hospitalized, and 1.1 million are treated and released from an emergency room. What statistics don't show are the countless numbers of TBIs that go unreported, undiagnosed, untreated and, therefore, underserved.

Woodruff's courageous public invitation into his private struggle has opened the window of awareness, shedding light into the millions

of American homes silently coping with the catastrophic effects of a TBI. Each day, families deal with all of the personality, behavioral, cognitive, speech, physical and emotional changes in their loved ones who have survived a TBI. The problem is that many people, including our soldiers, do not receive the comprehensive medical care from resuscitation to rehabilitation that is critical to their recovery.

The reasons ordinary Americans, including our combat veterans, do not get the care that they need are two-fold:

- **Necessary therapies**, such as cognitive rehabilitation, are typically not covered by private insurance companies for TBI. When these companies cover occupational, speech and physical therapies related to TBIs, they do so only for a very short period of time, which prevents the TBI survivor from receiving the seamless continuum of care for up to

two years that would enable many of them to get back on their feet and live a life filled with meaning and dignity.

- **There is no comprehensive federal legislation** addressing the enormous financial needs of our military and American families struggling to pay TBI-related medical bills, often reaching hundreds of thousands of dollars or more.

Those of us who have been around patients with brain injuries and the advocacy groups associated with TBI have been waiting for the likes of Bob Woodruff for some time. Soon after his media tour began, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced that it will begin screening all service men and women returning from overseas for TBI.

Members of Congress are considering bills to increase the related

standards of care for TBI. It took the bright lights associated with Woodruff to bring forth these changes, even though major news outlets have been reporting stories of soldiers with brain injuries for nearly three years.

Because fame is fleeting, and Woodruff is only one, albeit influential, man, now is the best time in our generation to push the federal government for broader and more-meaningful medical care for soldiers and all American families struggling with TBI. With immediate assistance from our elected officials, the media and supporters of people with brain injuries, the federal government can and should supplant Woodruff as the most visible advocate for soldiers and citizens with brain injuries.



WOODRUFF

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