



Veterans have ALS health benefits they may not know about

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) is known as “Lou Gehrig’s disease” because it afflicted the famed New York Yankees slugger, who died from the disease in 1941. ALS is a neuromuscular disease that affects up to 30,000 people. It is almost always fatal, and currently there is no known cure.

Though medical researchers do not yet understand why, studies have shown that ALS also has a connection with military service.

The National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine issued a report about a possible link in November 2006. After looking at a group of scientific studies examining the propensity of military vets to develop ALS, the report concluded that “there is limited and suggestive evidence of an association between military service and later development of ALS.”

Among the studies examined by the Institute of Medicine was one published in 2005 in the journal *Neurology* that evaluated ALS risk among veterans with service prior to 1982, including veterans of World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam war. That study concluded that these veterans, regardless of years of service, were at a statistically significant greater risk of developing ALS compared with civilians. Other studies have corroborated those findings, including studies of 1991 Gulf War veterans, among whom the link between ALS and military service was first noticed by scientists.

In response, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) amended its rules in September 2008 to automatically

presume that a veteran who develops ALS contracted it due to military service and need not prove the connection to receive treatment and care from the VA:

[T]he development of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis manifested at any time after discharge or release from active military, naval, or air service is sufficient to establish service connection for that disease. (38 CFR Sec. 3.318)

There are three exceptions: if there is “affirmative evidence” that military service did not cause the ALS, if there is affirmative evidence that the ALS was due to willful misconduct, or if the veteran’s military service was less than 90 days.

“The continuing uncertainty regarding specific precipitating factors or events that lead to development of the disease would present great difficulty for individual claimants seeking to establish service connection by direct evidence under generally applicable procedures in the absence of a presumption,” the VA stated. “This difficulty would be particularly profound in view of the rapid and devastating course of ALS and its impact on veterans and their families, which may inhibit their ability to participate in the development of evidence to support medi-

cally complex claims.”

NALC learned of this connection from retired member of Lorain, OH Branch 583 and Army veteran Bruce Barnard, who has ALS and wants other veterans to know about the benefits offered by the VA.

Barnard also has Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a cancer affecting the body’s lymphatic system, and doctors have estimated that he has just a few months, or even weeks, of life left. But the former Army Signal Corps member and Branch 583 president is facing his future with courage and energy.

The VA not only pays for Barnard’s

ALS treatment, it also helps pay for needs such as a wheelchair and wheelchair-accessible van, home modifications to adapt to wheelchair use and his extended stay at a nursing facility.

“That’s a lot of benefits that all veterans should be getting if they have Lou Gehrig’s disease,” Barnard said. “I want the word out. I found out by accident. At the Cleveland Clin-

ic, I happened to be sitting next to someone whose job was to get veterans signed up.” After the encounter, Barnard found the benefits listed on the VA’s website. You can find details on ALS treatment and other benefits on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website at va.gov.



Bruce Barnard