

Afghanistan veterans flock to disability support

• ANDREW TROUNSON - THE AUSTRALIAN DECEMBER 30, 2015



Proportionally more veterans from the Afghan theatre will be ­ totally incapacitated and needing maximum support, figures suggest.

Two Afghanistan war veterans are going on to the disability support pension each day as Australian fighters increasingly claim multiple health conditions and render the hostilities potentially the worst of all recent conflicts for life-changing impact.

Department of Veterans' Affairs figures suggest that compared with other recent conflicts, proportionally more from the Afghan theatre will be totally incapacitated and needing maximum support.

In the past year, the number of Afghan veterans on disability support has grown by a quarter, increasing by more than 700 to 3777 as of the end of September.

With post-traumatic stress disorder the largest condition with 1176

Hearing and back problems are the next most numerous conditions, followed by depressive disorders, where the number of accepted claims has quadrupled in three years to 643.

The number of Afghanistan veterans suffering alcohol dependence or alcohol

abuse amounts to 350, with a further 103 suffering anxiety.

Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans Association president Allan Thomas warned that DVA will be hard-pressed to meet the future needs of veterans in an atmosphere of government cost-cutting, and said some veterans were already waiting up to two years before having a claim accepted.

Afghanistan veterans on disability support are now suffering on average 2.85 conditions each. That is up from fewer than 2.4 conditions each three years ago.

University of Melbourne professor of health economics Philip Clarke said the numbers suggests that Afghanistan veterans are more likely to eventually be eligible for the Special Rate Disability Pension and entitled to a "gold card" covering all their healthcare costs.

"There is this continuing big proportion of claims for PTSD, so the question is whether there is any more active work we should be doing to better tackle this," Professor Clarke told *The Australian*.

The department tips that those supported under the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act will rise by more than 8000 over the next five years from 19,561 this year to 27,900 by 2020.

Veteran John Bale, of veteran support charity Soldier On, said veterans were putting their hands up sooner than those from previous conflicts