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For Immediate Release

## NEWS RELEASE

### **Study Observes Potential Medication for PTSD, Pain, and Substance Abuse**

SAN FRANCISCO – March 1, 2016 – A study conducted by researchers at the San Francisco VA Medical Center (SFVAMC) observed that buprenorphine, a medication which is FDA-approved to treat opioid dependence and used off-label in the treatment of chronic pain, may also be effective in improving symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in patients who have all three of these conditions.

Data was gathered and studied from 382 Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans enrolled in VA health care from October 1, 2007, to July 29, 2013, who had diagnoses of PTSD, chronic pain, and substance use disorders. About half were started on sublingual buprenorphine to treat opioid dependence. This group was compared to another group of Veterans with the same three conditions, who were instead maintained on a moderately high-dose opioid therapy for chronic pain conditions. “We explored whether sublingual buprenorphine incidentally improved PTSD symptoms,” says lead author Karen Seal, MD, MPH, Director of the Integrated Pain Team and the Integrated Care Clinic for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans at the San Francisco VA Medical Center.

The study showed that roughly twice as many Veterans in the buprenorphine group (23.7%) compared to the control (opioid therapy) group (11.7%) showed a long-term (up to 2 years) modest improvement in PTSD symptoms. In contrast, there was a very small trend toward worsening of PTSD symptoms in those on traditional opioid therapy. Of note, Veterans who were started on buprenorphine did not have worsening of their pain symptoms compared to the group maintained on chronic opioid therapy.

The study, entitled “Observational Evidence for Buprenorphine’s Impact on Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Veterans with Chronic Pain and Opioid Use Disorder” is the first study to observe a positive, unintended effect of the medication, buprenorphine, compared to traditional opioid therapy, in improving PTSD in Veterans. In addition, compared to traditional opioid therapy, buprenorphine has fewer side-effects, including addiction, and is less likely to result in overdose.

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“This study is important, especially for our high-risk population of Veterans that suffer from the triad of PTSD, chronic pain, and substance use disorders, because at this time, there is no single treatment option for patients with all three of these conditions,” says Dr. Seal.

“Most likely, buprenorphine works in more than one way,” says Dr. Seal. “Because it acts on several different types of opioid receptors, it may stabilize multiple neural circuits that reduce pain and opioid craving, and possibly helps with PTSD symptoms by inhibiting fear memories, and improving anxiety and depression symptoms.”

This study was conducted using a chart review of previously collected VA data. “Based on our preliminary findings, a dedicated, prospective controlled trial of buprenorphine in individuals with the triple threat of chronic pain, substance use disorders and PTSD may help to shed more light on how effective buprenorphine is in reducing chronic PTSD symptoms,” says Dr. Seal.

This study was published in the March issue of *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*. You can read the study at: [dx.doi.org/10.4088/JCP.15m09893](https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.15m09893).

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SFVAMC has the largest medical research program in the national VA system, with more than 200 research scientists, all of whom are faculty members at University of California, San Francisco.

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