Medical conference improves patient care, host nation relations

Story and photo by Richard McManus, USNH Yokosuka Public Affairs

American and Japanese health care workers from military and civilian medical treatment facilities throughout mainland Japan and Okinawa united to improve medical care for their youngest patients and their mothers at a Perinatal Care Conference Sept. 23.

The conference, hosted by U.S. Naval Hospital (USNH) Yokosuka, was attended by nearly 80 medical professionals and focused on ways to improve medical services for USNH Yokosuka patients.

USNH Yokosuka provides prenatal care to patients throughout the pregnancy and six weeks post partum while neonatal care is given to a baby within the first 28 days of life.

The day-long conference featured presentations by American and Japanese medical professionals from across Japan. Real-time translation services provided a bridge for the language gap among the diverse audience members and allowed for an open, two-way communication between English and Japanese speaking colleagues.

Capt. Catherine Copenhaver, an obstetrician at USNH Yokosuka, explained that this conference improved partnerships by bringing awareness to similarities between USNH Yokosuka and host nation hospitals in the area.

"By building mutual understanding of each other's needs, capabilities and limitations, we are improving our understanding of one another and creating relationships that will help us in the future." said Copenhaver.

One discussion at the conference focused on the USNH Yokosuka successful partnership with host nation hospitals to care for patients who require a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). Delivering more than 45 babies a month, USNH Yokosuka relies on host nation hospital's NICU in cases where a patient needs care but has not been medically evacuated to another military treatment facility.

"Having NICU capabilities for our patients at host nation hospitals is a great example of how Naval Hospital Yokosuka works with our partners in the community to provide safe, high quality care." said Capt. Stephen Pachuta, USNH Yokosuka commanding officer. "With this conference, we are continuing to build our relationship with Japanese hospitals and improve upon what is already a great relationship for the benefit of our patients."

Dr. Tomoaki Miyamoto, a neonatologist at Yokosuka Municipal Uwamachi Hospital, appreciated how the Japanese medical community and USNH Yokosuka work together and wants to see more dialogue of this type.

"It's very good to see the naval hospital and Japanese hospitals working together." said Miyamoto.

Lt. Christina Jahncke, an obstetrician at USNH Yokosuka, fields questions following a lecture on preterm labor and patient transfers at a Perinatal Conference hosted by USNH Yokosuka Sept. 23. The conference was attended by nearly 80 Japanese and American medical professionals and focused on ways to improve medical services for USNH Yokosuka patients.

The hospital plans to continue hosting the annual bi-national conference in the future.

"It is my sincere hope that this conference will continue to enhance our working relationship and bring us closer together as one medical community, providing safe, high quality care to our patients." said Pachuta.

DoD monitors substance abuse trends among service members

By Lisa Daniel, American Forces Press Service

Department of Defense (DoD) officials hope to shed light on what may be a disturbing new trend in substance abuse by service members, according to the department's director of health promotion and preventative services policy.

While illegal drug use has held static for several years, according to the department's annual Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Active Duty Personnel, the misuse of prescription drugs and legal substances is growing. In 2005, the survey showed an uptick in service members' misuse of legal substances such as prescription drugs, inhalants and compounds known as "designer drugs" marketed on the Internet often as herbal remedies, DoD Health Promotion and Preventative Services Director, Lynn Pahland said in a Sept. 28 interview with American Forces Press Service.

Unsure whether the increased reporting reflected real use or was a misinterpretation of questions, the department refined the questions for the 2008 survey, but the uptick remained, Pahland said, and closely aligned with a major civilian drug use survey by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

Pahland's team at Military Health Affairs immediately commissioned a research project to find out the motivation behind the answers. The results are expected later this month.

"It's a huge concern, it's a national concern," Pahland said. "Any kind of drug use or health choice that leads to the impairment of a military person leads to the degradation of readiness."

Underscoring that national concern, Gil Kerlikowske, the Obama administration's drug control policy director, called prescription drug abuse "America's fastest-growing drug problem." He issued the statement after Congress passed the Secure and Responsible Drug Disposal Act, a law designed to curb misuse of prescriptions through better disposal of unused or expired prescriptions.

"Prescription drug abuse is America's fastest-growing drug problem, and one largely fed by an unlikely source - Americans' medicine cabinets," Kerlikowske said in the statement. "[The new drug disposal law] will save lives by providing patients with safe, environmentally sound ways to dispose of unused or expired prescription drugs."

According to Pahland, the military study will closely examine trends among service members and try to pinpoint causes and possible prevention programs. "The military absolutely comes from the U.S. population, but there also is a very specific type of individual who comes into the military," she said.

Military Health Affairs' health promotion and preventative services office works closely with other federal agencies to identify emerging drug trends and develop policies and prevention tactics, Pahland added. "We populate each other's work groups and committees, and share data with others," she said. "Our primary focus is to use every resource with our colleagues in other agencies and in academia to identify, study and track drug use."

The health-related behaviors survey, which asks active-duty service members to report their behaviors anonymously, "really gives us a good snapshot of people's attitudes and behaviors, so we can react to the data and improve our programs," she said.

As with its drug prevention programs, the military has numerous regulations and policies against drug abuse, including legal substances, covered in the Uniformed Code of Military Justice, Defense Department personnel policies, as well as those of the services. "In some cases, installation commanders issue rules against certain legal substances, and work with local officials to curb the use of 'herbal' compounds," she said.

Regardless of the duplication and various sources, it is clear that even the misuse of legal substances is banned for all service members. As one example, DoD Directive 1010-3.4 includes in its definition of drug abuse, "The wrongful use, possession, distribution or introduction onto a military installation of a controlled substance, prescription medication, over-the-counter medication, or intoxicating substance [other than alcohol]."

The policy goes on to say that "wrongful" means: "without legal justification or excuse, and includes use contrary to the directions of the manufacturer or prescribing health-care provider, and use of any intoxicating substance not intended for human ingestion."

But military leaders and department officials know service members are abusing legal substances, sometimes with disastrous consequences. Officials with the Armed Forces Medical Examiner's office report instances in the past year of service members dying from sniffing, or "huffing," inhalants.

"Military members have sniffed glue, paint thinner and gases such as Freon, butane, propane and helium, all of which are known to cause disorientation, euphoria and other symptoms," Navy Lt. Cmdr. Sean Swiackowski, deputy medical examiner, said in a recent interview with The Pentagon Channel. "We've seen in the past year or two just how prevalent it has become."

Designer drugs such as synthetic marijuana, marketed as "spice" or "K-2," and salvia divinorum, a variation of the sage plant known as "salvia," also have caught on in recent years, according to Defense officials. The compounds are legal in most states, inexpensive, and have not shown up on random drug tests, although that may soon change as tests are improved.

But they also can be dangerous. "A lot of these products are made in garages and homes, so you don't have quality control," Army Col. Timothy Lyons, chief of toxicology in the medical examiner's office, said. "Each package, even under the same name, has different levels of compounds. So you really just don't know what you're getting."

Pahland, Swiackowski, and Lyons agree that ignorance of the dangers of such substances is a big problem. Many are marketed as herbal remedies and compared to products like St. John's Wart, poppy seeds and chamomile tea, service members often buy them thinking it will be a safe way to relax.

"I've talked to quite a few people who said they did not know this was something harmful. Too many service members still are reluctant to seek medical attention for problems like depression and anxiety, and may be self-medicating," Pahland said.

"Especially in the military, we have people who are used to being self-sufficient who might interpret depression as a weakness. But we certainly do not," she added.

Health Affairs is looking at various policy options to prevent substance abuse, Pahland said, including the different methodologies used in dispensing prescriptions and tracking the movement of those prescriptions.

"One of the most important things is that the entire Department of Defense has a focus on the well-being of our forces," she said. "So there are many, many areas in the DoD that are looking to better protect our personnel. The main thing, from my perspective, is: don't take a drug you're not prescribed, or that you know nothing about. These things seem routine, but they're so very important."