



**BIAM Podcast Series: *Picking Your Brain***

**Episode 2 “Veterans”**

Featuring: Linda Picon, Dr. Joel Scholten, Dr. Andres Salazar

**Host:** Kate Perelman

**(Kate)** The views, opinions, and findings contained in this podcast are those of the host and subject matter experts. They should not be construed as official Department of Defense positions, policies, or decisions unless designated by other official documentation.

**(Kate)** Brain Injury Awareness Month is an opportunity for the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, or DVBIC, to tell the story of traumatic brain injury through the experiences of those who have fought and continue to fight for the freedoms that we enjoy. In this episode of *Picking Your Brain*, we discuss the over 19 million people today who identify as veterans and the effects that TBI can have on this population and their families.

Since its creation in 1992 by an act of Congress, the then Defense and Veterans Head Injury Program’s mission was to serve active duty military, their beneficiaries, and veterans with traumatic brain injuries through state-of-the-art clinical care, innovative clinical research initiatives and educational programs. DVBIC’s first national director, Dr. Andres Salazar.

**(Dr. Salazar audio)** And so the other aspect of our concept...was that we had to reach across to wherever these patients were. And so they were not only in military hospitals, but for the rehab and more severe ones, and later on, they were all in the VA. And so that's where we sort of evolved this whole notion of an integrated Defense and Veterans Head injury program.

**(Kate)** According to a 2018 VA report, almost 200,000 service members transition from the military every year. This makes the VA the largest integrated health care system in the country, serving over nine million enrolled veterans annually. As a result of the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, this “period of adjustment” for veterans may include seeking continuing care for a TBI diagnosis.

To put the number of TBIs sustained at war in context, DVBIC estimates that 22 percent of all combat wounds during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom were brain injuries. For comparison, brain injuries accounted for only 12 percent of combat wounds in the Vietnam War.

To address the population of transitioning service members who’ve sustained multiple injuries while on active duty Congress appropriated a little over 30 million dollars for the Polytrauma System of Care in 2005. Polytrauma is often characterized as two or more injuries sustained in the same incident, which, at times, can affect multiple body parts and organ systems resulting in physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral disabilities. Because of this, veterans and service members with polytrauma require higher-level clinical care and other support services. Through its five rehab centers and 23 network sites, the



Polytrauma System of Care provides access to multidisciplinary teams of specialists who develop and implement individualized treatment plans that address the needs and goals of veterans and families. ...

**(Dr. Scholten audio)** ... Chairman Tillis, Ranking Member Gillibrand and members of the subcommittee. ...

**(Kate)** Dr. Joel Scholten serves as the associate Chief of Staff for rehabilitation services at the VA Medical Center, in Washington D.C., and the National Director of VA's Polytrauma System. In late 2017, Dr. Scholten testified before a Senate Armed Services Sub-committee about the diagnosis and treatment of mild TBI.

**(Dr. Scholten)** VA's TBI poly trauma program delivers world class rehabilitation services for veterans and service members. Through this program, VA continues to advance the diagnosis, evaluation and treatment of TBI.

**(Kate)** I had the opportunity to sit down with both Dr. Scholten and Ms. Linda Picon. Ms. Picon has been with the Department of Veterans of Affairs for over 25 years, and cared for those with TBI, first as a Speech Language-Pathologist, then as a ...

**(Ms. Picon)**... senior consultant for rehabilitation and prosthetics services in the Veterans Health Administration. And I serve as a liaison for traumatic brain injury to the Defense Health Agency through DVBIC.

**(Kate)** What is the Polytrauma System of Care?

**(Dr. Scholten)** So, the Polytrauma system of care is really an extensive integrated system of care that VA has developed in order to connect our entire healthcare system with TBI specialists across the country in order to ensure that veterans and service members have access to TBI care.

**(Ms. Picon)** One of the hallmarks of rehabilitation in the Polytrauma System of Care is the interdisciplinary team. We have either members of that team that are embedded in the team or collaborate depending on the needs of the veteran or service member. So a number of things that are key to providing a wide variety of services that patients with traumatic brain injury may benefit from.

**(Dr. Scholten)** There's probably two general scenarios we could describe. One would be for individuals that have sustained a severe traumatic brain injury that require inpatient hospitalization...transitioning into a VA Medical Center to one of our Polytrauma rehab centers to receive inpatient rehabilitation. And from there, depending on the need, may transition into some of the other specialized programs that Linda mentioned earlier. Just kind of meeting that individual's needs at wherever, wherever we can provide that at...That's a smaller number of individuals with severe TBI.



What's much more common is individuals leaving active duty service and then accessing VA for care. The first time they come into the VA for health care, they will be asked to TBI screening questions which are four questions asking about potential brain injury during service. If the veteran answers yes to all four questions, they are then referred for an evaluation with a TBI specialist... So again, every individual is unique. Every brain injury is unique and so the team is then built around the challenges they're facing and working together along with the veteran's family or caregiver if they want them to be involved to develop that treatment plan.

**(Kate)** Could you describe the importance of input from veterans and caregivers in developing those plans?

**(Dr. Scholten)** Well, I think active engagement in any healthcare setting is critical. And particularly for traumatic brain injury, there's not a quick fix. There's no magic pill, at least not at this time. So, things that we often consider are essential for living a healthy and a better life include regular exercise, eating right following sleep hygiene techniques, stress reduction. Those things are long term commitments and having the input and the support of a caregiver or your family support system to encourage you to follow those health care recommendations are really critical.

**(Kate)** Let's pause right here for a moment. The information from the families and caregivers of TBI patients that Dr. Scholten is talking about is fundamental to this year's Brain Injury Awareness Month theme of TBI: Me, You and Us. To explain, here is Joselyn Griffin, program manager for the A Head for the Future outreach initiative.

**(Joselyn Griffin)** At the heart of our mission, are the people that are going to experience TBI in some way, shape, or form, are the Me, the You and the Us. The active duty or the veteran who themselves have experienced and are hopefully on a path to recovery with TBI. The providers that are working so hard to get the most accurate, updated information. And then the 'us' which is the family member or the caregiver, anyone that is functioning in a support capacity for someone who's experienced and is living life with a TBI.

**(Kate)** Now, back to my interview with Dr. Scholten and Ms. Linda Picon.

Can you tell us about the VA TBI research programs, and how they're all interrelated to each other?

**(Ms. Picon)** So the VA has a really robust research program that we're very proud of, in collaboration with other federal agencies and civilian partners. You know, when you look at the different research programs that we have, we're really looking to understand traumatic brain injury and what it does to a person. So, we have programs that we do, for example, with DVBIC, studies on the improved understanding of medical and psychological needs in veterans and service members with chronic traumatic brain injury, where we're looking at the long-term effects of TBI, and how comorbidities may impact someone's health over a lifetime. For example, the long term impact of military-relevant brain injury consortium or LIMBIC that was funded this last fall in 2019, that also look at the longitudinal



effects of traumatic brain injury, the different comorbidities, sensory problems and so forth that can impact someone over their lifetime.

**(Kate)** What are the unique challenges that veterans face when recovering from or living with a TBI?

**(Dr. Scholten)** Oftentimes we can look at it if the initial injury was a severe traumatic brain injury, the likely complications or challenges will turn into more of a chronic condition. So, looking at how to best maximize health and wellness over the lifespan of the individual. And so, it's really a challenge, I think, to maintain kind of an ongoing relationship with veterans. Because we're working with our rehabilitation efforts to maximize independence, and then have this kind of periodic touch points where we can tweak and provide additional input to maximize wellness, as time goes on.

**(Ms. Picon)** So, I do think that much more than stigma is the thinking that "Oh, I'm going to get better." "Things are going to be fine or, you know, I don't have time I'm busy, I'm working." So, we really focus on that access, making sure that people have access to the information and the services. As Dr. Scholten mentioned, through telehealth means being able to connect to a provider from your home at a time that's convenient for you.

**(Dr. Scholten)** So with the Polytrauma System of Care, our first telehealth system was really, as Linda mentioned before that, video connection between the Polytrauma rehab centers and Walter Reed and Bethesda Naval at that time, meeting the families and the teams and really talking about that transition of care because that's during any transition is where you are more likely to make a medical error. So it's pretty amazing to think that from TBI care, telehealth went from those team-to-team handoffs to now being able where we can connect with veterans in their home to do follow up visits and do TBI assessments, has really extended the reach of rehabilitation and helped us rethink the environment of healthcare and that relationship that's so critical to maintain with veterans that have sustained a traumatic brain injury.

**(Kate)** What does the VA's work in TBI mean to you, why are you so passionate about veterans and TBI?

**(Dr. Scholten)** In medical school and residency, I was always fascinated with the nervous system and particularly how the brain worked and just the challenges of not only diagnosis, but also treatment. And so, having had the privilege of working in rehabilitation and seeing how rehabilitation and really developing an individualized plan can make a massive impact in someone's life was, was incredibly rewarding. And then, in addition, having that privilege of working at the VA and having a mission to care for our service members and veterans who have, you know, placed their life on the line is really very rewarding and just, again, a privilege to be able to do so.

**(Ms. Picon)** I do have to say that, you know, from the very first exposure that I had to traumatic brain injury, I was fascinated by it. I think that that the aspect of rehabilitation and what you can do to help someone overcome the challenges than you know, the effects of traumatic brain injury is extremely rewarding. But in particular, when I am working with veterans and service members, there's this sense of,



of pride and honor to be able to help someone who has fought the fight and, and been in combat or in other ways has served the country, that has been extremely, extremely rewarding. I think in particular, over the years when I started seeing people who have just recently been in combat and the stories that they, that they were telling the ways in which they were injured, it was there was just a sense of pride in being able to, to contribute to that rehabilitation and wellbeing of that person that I can't explain in words. Truly an honor to, to be able to see someone who can't eat, who can't talk, who may have, you know, challenges with mental health and other aspects of cognition and so forth, to be able to return to life and to, to their communities and to doing the things that it's beyond rewarding.

**(Kate)** Thank you so much for sitting down and talking to us, this was really wonderful, thank you.

**(Ms. Picon & Dr. Scholten)** Thank you...our pleasure.

**(Kate)** The VA offers TBI rehabilitation and care for eligible veterans and service members at VA Medical Centers across the nation. Please visit the TBI Polytrauma System of Care web site at [www.polytrauma.va.gov](http://www.polytrauma.va.gov) or contact your local VA medical facility. For more information about TBI, visit [dvbic.dcoe.mil](http://dvbic.dcoe.mil). That's d-v-b-i-c dot d-c-o-e dot mil.

*Picking Your Brain* is a four-part series from the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center that focuses on the care and recovery of service members and veterans who have sustained a TBI. It's produced and edited by Vinnie White and was hosted today by me, Kate Perelman. In the next episode of *Picking Your Brain*, we'll explore DVVIC's clinical investigations into the effects of TBI on service members, veterans, their families, and caregivers.