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

**Episode 4 “TBI Caregivers”**

Featuring: DVBIC Division Chief, Navy Captain Scott Pyne

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.

TBI is treatable, and recovery is expected with appropriate care. In fact, most people who suffer a mild TBI (also known as a concussion) recover completely. Family members and caregivers play an important role in the care and rehabilitation of service members and veterans who have sustained a traumatic brain injury. The Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center understands the vital role caregivers have in this process and created a Caregiver Curriculum that provides caregivers and family members with information and resources not only to care for their loved ones, but also themselves.

In our last episode of *Picking Your Brain*, we talk about the caregivers of those with a TBI, and how their support and care plays an essential role in their recovery.

**(CAPT Pyne)**...Hi, I'm Scott Pyne. I'm the Division Chief for the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center.

**(Kate)** CAPT Pyne is a board-certified family medicine doctor who commissioned into the Navy over three decades ago. As division chief, CAPT Pyne is responsible for all key activities of DVBIC and fulfilling its mission.

**(CAPT Pyne)**...So really our mission is to promote the state-of-the science care from point of injury to reintegration across the traumatic brain injury spectrum. That's a mouthful. And I think with many missions, we try to shrink down our words so that everyone understands them a bit more. But really, what we're trying to do is we're trying to keep up with science. Again, we want to promote what research has proven.

As a family medicine physician, it's expected that we're able to understand and treat mild traumatic brain injury. So I've been doing that since my residency a long time ago, I had the opportunity to transition and do specialty training in primary care sports medicine. And through that I've been able to take care of athletes, specifically at the Naval Academy. But at every base that I've worked at, I've taken care of athletes, whether they be family member athletes or military athletes. I think the primary care family medicine experience allows me to see the full range of the effects of traumatic brain injury. So it's, it's very easy for me to take care of a concussion patient, but because I'm a family physician, I also get to know the rest of the family. And during Operation Desert Storm and Enduring Freedom, when we had a lot of service members coming back who just weren't right, I was the one that was seeing their families. And I was the one that was able to talk about things with them and try to help them get better.



Defense Health Agency

**(Kate)** That's great because our theme for this Brain Injury Awareness Month is TBI: Me, You, and Us and its really talking about how it's a community effort to recover from or to go on the journey of recovery from TBI and to be part of that team and be able to see how the family is reacting to possible symptoms and the recovery of a person with a concussion or more severe traumatic brain injury. How are DVBIC's activities in the field related to overall policy?

**(CAPT Pyne)** In my role as the division chief of DVBIC, I chair a committee called the Traumatic Brain Injury Advisory Committee, and this committee is composed of the service leads from the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Marine Corps in traumatic brain injury. We also have representation from the Defense Health Agency, as well as folks from the National Intrepid Center of Excellence. Additionally, we partner with Uniformed Services University in much of what we do... A number of the things we do related to policy, one of them is the... the Comprehensive Strategy and Action Plan for Warfighter Brain Health. This was a memo that was released by the Deputy Secretary of Defense back in October of 2018. This is working through very high levels at the Pentagon... in order to provide many of the things that DVBIC been doing all along and I'm really quite pleased that DVBIC so deeply involved in this effort... What I envision happening with this comprehensive strategy is it will lead to policy that will direct how we provide care for our service members.

**(Kate)** Through these episodes, we've focused a lot of attention on the branches here at HQ could talk about those who may not fall under a traditional branch and the hard work they do for DVBIC?"

**(CAPT Pyne)** We wouldn't be able to record this episode if we didn't have people in our communications section at DVBIC that enabled us to do this. We have folks that market DVBIC. We have folks that deal with our social media campaign through Facebook and manage our website. And that's really important because our website is really the true link to our customers, whether they be service members, leaders, clinical providers that are out there. I see Brain Injury Awareness Month is DVBIC's opportunity to shine... March has been defined as Brain Injury Awareness Month, and we really put a lot of effort at DVBIC to use the avenue through the Defense Health Agency... to put out information that we want people to remember, that we want people to use day to day... And I think it really helps us to remember what that focus is. And uh, we have great opportunities to go out and tell all the good work that we're doing.

**(Kate)** We've talked a lot about those who've sustained a TBI and those who treat them. With caregivers being such an integral part of the recovery process, can you describe their impact on those with TBI?

**(CAPT Pyne)** Caregiving is tough. If anyone's done any caregiving, you know, with children or, you know, even getting a new pet is, is a lot of work. It doesn't at all compare to the amount of work that caregivers have to do with their person they're caring for with traumatic brain injury. Again, this isn't just the severe and penetrating traumatic brain injury that requires care. Mild and moderate traumatic brain injury can also lead to people requiring help with what they do. Now that help can be almost every function of that person to just helping to manage little simple things. We, we talked about traumatic brain injury being an invisible wound, you know. Well, caregivers are often invisible, in all the great things that they do. If you can imagine if you're caring for a spouse, your relationship changes. So now that



Defense Health Agency

relationship of two peers, each with their strength, becomes a relationship where, where one of those peers needs a lot of help to do the things that they used to do. And that's coupled with frustration on both parts. That, that's difficult. How to if you're a parent caregiver of your child or a child caregiver of your parent, the relationship changes. And then there are other things that are involved. There's a dynamic of the rest of the family. What happens to the children that, that might be in the family that require caregiving? What happens to the health of the caregiver, you know, what defines the worth of the caregiver? You know, because this is to me the caregiving is of great worth. And I know they recognize that as well, but it definitely isn't what they chose when things started, so it requires a new calibration on what the future holds. And I think that's very, very difficult and any opportunity that we can take to help folks who are caregiving, I'm all for it. In the clinical arena, I've said before I've met many a patient who came to see me for an illness and in talking to him bit more I find out that they're challenged taking care of a significant other at home. We're doing right now is showing that folks who provide caregiving services have different needs. And those needs to be addressed. And, and I don't think those needs have been addressed as well as they could be.

**(Kate)** Through congressional mandate in 2007, DVBIC participated in a study to understand the long-term impacts of those caring for someone with a TBI. DVBIC Longitudinal Studies Program Analyst, Johanna Smith.

**(Johanna Smith)** I think Congress knew that there's more than just the service member in this picture. And I think a lot of parents or spouses, sometimes even just friends, family, you know, didn't realize the involvement they were going to have when their loved one went off to war. So it was a really important aspect of the mandate that we got the chance to, to look at what is the impact on the family, and it seems to be, unfortunately, pretty significant.

**(Kate)** Erin O'Dell is a regional education coordinator with DVBIC, and is a spouse of an active duty Marine with a history of TBI.

**(Erin O'Dell)** Really my interest with TBI started as I was researching PTSD when I was in school, and I started finding more and more articles that were kind of linking them together or comparing and contrasting them. So I got interested more in the aspects of TBI rather than PTSD and the role that it's playing in our military system and how it's affecting our veteran population and I came to find that TBIs are significantly under-diagnosed and they're under-reported. So to have the opportunity to kind of provide some education on TBIs throughout the DoD in the VA was really intriguing to me.

**(Kate)** What's it like being a caregiver for someone with TBI?

**(Erin O'Dell)** It can be very frustrating at times. There's often situations where I have to remind myself that he's not putting the milk in the pantry just to be a pain, you know. It's literally he stuck the milk in the pantry and the TV remote in the refrigerator because he was just lost in whatever he was doing or, you know, that thought process didn't come through that this isn't where this is supposed to go, he just put it



Defense Health Agency

away. So it can be difficult at times. But it's also very rewarding to, you know, be able to help care for him and watch him progress and kind of move through some of the difficulties that he has.

**(Kate)** Did you find that there was enough education around for him to feel comfortable to seek treatment, to, has he sought treatment?"

**(Erin O'Dell)** Yeah, yes. After I pushed him for a year. He, finally went and started talking to his PCMs and explaining to them what was going on and kind of the symptoms and stuff that he was having. So he was being seen at the Intrepid Spirits on Ft. Belvoir, and they have since discharged him. I'm kind of glad he's at a good place. So that's, that's good to know. But it definitely helped, you know, with some of the symptoms that he was having to get that treatment. But as far as having an education out there that kind of promotes the treatment for TBI, there's more of it now I've seen, you know, in the past few years, but there's still stigmas associated with it that it's a career-ending injury.

**(Kate)** Although they perform many of the same duties, caregivers might not see themselves as case managers, health care providers, or benefits coordinators. For Jasmine Blair, and her husband Wally – a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, caregivers are partners in TBI recovery.

**(Jasmine Blair)** I don't necessarily view myself as a caregiver, I view myself more as a spouse that you know, wants to help her husband lead a fulfilling life. At the beginning, we didn't think it was anything really of a concern. But then as time went on, it just came to a point to where it was just almost like it came to blows. Like we finally sat down and talked and discussed, you know, everything I was seeing and how he was personally feeling and just had an open dialogue, which led him to go see the TBI clinic and look for resources to help him lead a more productive life.

**(Wally Blair)** If you need help, you need help. And it isn't one of those things where you can self-medicate, where you can go without treatment because it does affect more than you.

**(Jasmine Blair)** I feel it's important for caregivers to take care of themselves because if they're not doing that, then they can't really better support their service member or their family. It's important to be an advocate for your service member to better help them with their treatment plans and going to whatever appointments you possibly can to make sure that information is fully being given to better help their recovery process.

**(Wally Blair)** I received the Purple Heart as a result of the 2007 IED strike. My wife and family deserve it more than anything. I mean, they've paid more of a price than I have.

**(Kate)** Stories like this one show why DVVIC's work is so vital. All the research, all the clinical tools, all the educational materials come down to simply this, supporting service members and veterans on their TBI recovery journeys. When we set out to record this podcast, we expected to 'pick the brains' of DVVIC's subject matter experts to understand how the organization creates better outcomes for those who sustained a TBI and their families. Well, we got that and so much more. Our interviewees didn't just



Defense Health Agency

give us facts and figures. They showed us why they were so passionate about their jobs. Some even shared their own personal TBI stories. So from all of us at *Picking Your Brain*, a heartfelt thank you to everyone who contributed to this podcast.

If you are a service member or veteran who believes they've sustained a TBI, or want more information on the studies, educational or clinical tools featured in this series, please 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 special four-part podcast series observing Brain Injury Awareness Month from the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center. It was written, produced and edited by Vinnie White and was hosted today by me, Kate Perelman. Special thanks to DVVIC's outreach initiative, A Head for the Future, for providing content from their 'TBI Champion' video series for this episode.