



VA Minister blind on SEATO nurse benefits

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs acknowledges the contribution of civilian "SEATO" nurses who worked selflessly in difficult conditions during the Vietnam War, but denies their claims for veterans' benefits, writes David Hutchins.

WHILE the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Warren Snowdon, is

prepared to open an expert forum on improving the mental health of Australia's war veterans, particularly those suffering Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, it seems he is blind and deaf to the plight of Australian SEATO nurses who went to war zones to care for our military.

Minister Snowdon welcomed international and local experts to the Many Paths, One Purpose Expert forum on August 12. At the event, a world-leading military mental health expert, Dr Jonathan Bisson from the University of Cardiff, talked about his latest research and new approaches to treating stress-related mental disorders.

"It is our duty to look after and support those who have sacrificed so much for their country. This is why it is essential we learn from leading mental health experts like Professor Bisson who has seen first-hand, while serving in the British Army, the devastating affects war can have on a person's mental wellbeing," Mr Snowdon said at the forum.



Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Warren Snowdon.

In the August issue of *H&A*, in her Your Workforce column, Australian Nursing Federation Federal Secretary Lee Thomas protests the plight of SEATO (South East Asian Treaty Organisation) nurses, after their service in the Vietnam War, as one of the most enduring ANF causes.

"For eight years, from 1964 to 1972, these volunteer civilian nurses treated the casualties of the war, but with none of the formal protection afforded to their military counterparts," she wrote, suggesting that these nurses should be integrated into the compensation and care of the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

"The way the SEATO nurses have been treated by consecutive federal governments is nothing short of a national disgrace. When they returned home from enduring the horrors of war, the

SEATO nurses were struck down by a range of similar physical and mental conditions experienced by the "other" Vietnam veterans, with many of the illnesses due to their exposure to Agent Orange chemicals," she said.

However, the ANF's calls for the Minister to make a determination under the Veterans' Entitlement Act to extend the eligibility of SEATO nurses and allow them

for veterans of Australia's defence forces and their families for the effects of service.

"Successive government policy on repatriation benefits for civilians has consistently required that they be attached to the defence forces and be subject to its command and control.

"The members of the civilian surgical and medical teams who worked in Vietnam were not integrated with the defence forces, nor were they subject

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veterans' benefits, has been rejected. While acknowledging their contribution, Snowdon is steadfast.

"We (the government) appreciate that members of the (SEATO) surgical and medical teams in Vietnam worked selflessly under difficult conditions. However, the primary purpose of the Australian Repatriation System is to provide compensation, income support and healthcare

to military control and command. These individuals were employed under contract by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade under a SEATO aid program. They were, in fact, working on short-term engagements with the Department of External Affairs in Vietnam, in a civilian, rather than a military, capacity," Snowdon said, confirming his stance that despite their worthy

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service they remain ineligible for veterans' benefits.

"As civilians, they were covered for compensation under the Commonwealth Employees' Compensation legislation, now the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988 (SRCA), which is administered by Comcare.

"This cover provides compensation for death, injury or impairment. Such compensation can include payment of related medical expenses, income maintenance or lump sum payment.

"Any SEATO nurses diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or any other condition, which they believe developed as a result of their employment in Vietnam are able to submit a claim for workers' compensation to Comcare," Snowdon says.

"If the nurse's claim is established, the Comcare scheme provides entitlements including access to trauma-focussed psychological and medical interventions which have been shown to be effective in the management of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"The focus of Comcare's service delivery is to ensure that every injured worker receives high quality, evidence-based healthcare services to facilitate improved health outcomes," Snowdon concluded.

Predictably, Snowdon's comments garnered ANF criticism, with Lee Thomas slamming them as reflecting

the government's lack of care for these nurses.

"Comments made by Federal Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Warren Snowdon, that SEATO nurses diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or any other condition should make a workers' compensation claim under Comcare are short-sighted and consistent with the inadequate approach taken by consecutive federal governments in recognition of these nurses.

"Comcare is a workers' compensation system and is not suited to deal with issues of injury and illness associated in the context of war. It is a much more difficult process. This is why there is a separate system with the Department of Veterans' Affairs for the military to deal with the same issues," she said.

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"Does the government think that (SEATO) nurses were tending sick and injured soldiers in a bubble in Vietnam? Did they not drink the same water, eat the same food, and experience the same poor sanitation and get sprayed with the same chemicals, at the same time as caring for those injured and dying," she said

"While it is accepted that nurses, like those who served in the military in Vietnam, are



ANF Federal Secretary, Lee Thomas

affected by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the majority of these nurses have physical claims, including for Autoimmune disease, Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma and other anxiety disorders.

"These men and women are now in their 60s and 70s; several have died. Their lives have been seriously affected by the Vietnam War and their careers were limited due to ill health. All SEATO nurses want is to be able to access the healthcare they

deserve, and the financial resources to be able to do so.

"The Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986 does not have to be altered, a Ministerial Determination would be enough to allow SEATO nurses access to the same entitlements as the military and other civilians, such as the Salvation Army, who served in Vietnam," she says.

In her August column, Thomas mentions Jenny Hunter, a former SEATO nurse, who

served in Vietnam and is suffering Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma and other associated health issues.

"Jenny applied for medical treatment and a pension due to her illness under the VEA, but was refused on the grounds that she was not a veteran. Despite their commitments to their patients and their suffering, the SEATO Nurses, like Jenny, have been denied adequate compensation from consecutive federal governments because of a bureaucratic loophole.

"Because they were sent by the then Dept. of External Affairs and were 'attached' or 'under the command of' the Australian Defence Force, the nursing teams have been denied access to benefits under the VEA," Thomas said, referring to various reports supporting resolution of the SEATO claims.

"In February 2000, the MOHR review noted that the nurses, '...were integrated with the ADF and performed like functions...' and should therefore be deemed as performing qualifying service for repatriation," Thomas said, suggesting the Minister's position is unacceptable, particularly as civilian groups (deemed as being attached to the ADF) being granted access to VEA benefits through Ministerial Discretion.

Thomas maintained that the ANF appreciates that the federal government is fighting many issues on many fronts, but, in all decency, it cannot forget the SEATO nurses. **HA**