



Highlights of [GAO-04-815T](#) testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

More than a decade after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, there is continued interest in the federal response to the health concerns of Gulf War veterans. Gulf War veterans' reports of illnesses and possible exposures to various health hazards have prompted numerous federal research projects on Gulf War illnesses. This research has been funded primarily by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Defense (DOD), and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). In 1993, the President named the Secretary of VA as the responsible party for coordinating research activities undertaken or funded by the executive branch of the federal government on the health consequences of service in the Gulf War. In 2002, a congressionally mandated federal advisory committee—the VA Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses (RAC)—was established to provide advice on federal Gulf War illnesses research needs and priorities to the Secretary of VA.

This statement is based on GAO's report entitled *Department of Veterans Affairs: Federal Gulf War Illnesses Research Strategy Needs Reassessment* ([GAO-04-767](#)). The testimony presents findings about the status of research on Gulf War illnesses and VA's communication and collaboration with RAC.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-815T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Janet Heinrich at (202) 512-7119.

GULF WAR ILLNESSES

Federal Research Efforts Have Waned, and Research Findings Have Not Been Reassessed

What GAO Found

The federal focus on Gulf War-specific research has waned, but VA has not yet analyzed the latest research findings to identify whether there were gaps in research or to identify promising areas for future research. As of September 2003, about 80 percent of the 240 federally funded medical research projects for Gulf War illnesses had been completed. In recent years, VA and DOD have decreased their expenditures on Gulf War illnesses research and have expanded the scope of their medical research programs to incorporate the long-term health effects of all hazardous deployments. Interagency committees formed by VA to coordinate federal Gulf War illnesses research have evolved to reflect these changing priorities, but over time these entities have been dissolved or have become inactive. In addition, VA has not reassessed the extent to which the collective findings of completed Gulf War illnesses research projects have addressed key research questions or whether the questions remain relevant. The only assessment of progress in answering these research questions was published in 2001, when findings from only about half of all funded Gulf War illnesses research were available. Moreover, it did not identify whether there were gaps in existing Gulf War illnesses research or promising areas for future research. This lack of a comprehensive analysis of research findings leaves VA at greater risk of failing to answer unresolved questions about causes, course of development, and treatments for Gulf War illnesses.

RAC's efforts to provide advice and make recommendations to the Secretary of VA on Gulf War illnesses research may have been hampered by VA senior administrators' poor information sharing and limited collaboration on research initiatives and program planning. For example, VA failed to inform RAC about its 2002 major research program announcement that included Gulf War illnesses research. VA and RAC are exploring ways to improve information sharing and collaboration, including VA's hiring of a senior scientist who would both guide VA's Gulf War illnesses research and serve as the agency's liaison for routine updates to the advisory committee. However, most of these changes had not been finalized at the time of GAO's review.