

V.A. Recruits Millionth Veteran for Its Genetic Research Database



By Gina Kolata

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The News

On Saturday, after a 12-year effort, the Department of Veterans Affairs reached a long-term goal — it enrolled the millionth veteran in a genetic database, the Million Veteran Program.

According to the V.A., the Million Veteran Program is the largest such database in the world. It includes not only genetic information but also is linked to the department’s electronic medical records and even contains records of diet and environmental exposure.

The department says its data are available for now only to V.A. doctors and scientists, most of whom also have academic appointments. They have published hundreds of studies using what has already been collected.



A U.S. Army veteran prepared to kayak during a Veterans Affairs health care network kayaking and sailing event on the Hudson River in August. Spencer Platt/Getty Images

A Moment That Sums It Up: 3:46 p.m.

The millionth vet joined the database on the afternoon of Nov. 8. Employees who had waited a dozen years for this moment wept.

As the goal approached, the department had started an intensive email campaign, encouraging vets to sign up online or at V.A. medical centers. In the few weeks building up to the millionth vet, what had been a few hundred enrollees a day turned into thousands. The department created a ticker, which it posted online, showing the numbers.

“This is a gift to the world,” said Dr. Shereef Elnahal, the under secretary for health in the Department’s Veterans Affairs.

The V.A. will continue to enroll more vets to the database, but this was a symbolic moment.

Why It Matters: A diverse database yields disease insights.

For years, researchers have been building large databases for genetic research. Using them they have found, for example, genes that appear to confer resistance to dementia and ones that most likely contribute to obesity. The discoveries provide paths to understanding these diseases and developing treatments.

There are other large genetic databases, but they have mostly been built in Europe and include few minorities. The V.A. says its database offers a more diverse population: 175,000 people with African ancestry and 80,000 Hispanics joined the Million Veteran Program. The database also includes 100,000 women.

“It’s a massive investment and scientific opportunity,” said Dr. Amit V. Khera, a genetic researcher at Massachusetts General Hospital. He is not a V.A. researcher, but he has used the data through collaborations with researchers who are affiliated with the department.

As the database acquired participants, about 600 V.A. researchers registered to use it. The result so far has been more than 350 papers on diseases and disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder, heart disease, high blood pressure and nonalcoholic liver disease.

For example, said Dr. Sumitra Muralidhar, director of the Million Veteran Program, researchers found genes linked to having flashbacks of traumatic events, a feature of post-traumatic stress. Now, Dr. Muralidhar said, investigators can study those genes and the role they play, which may help in developing treatments for PTSD.

The department also says it is being mindful of patient privacy. Although researchers can examine genetic and other data and links to medical records, fewer than 10 people at the V.A. have the links that tie records to individuals. Those records, Dr. Muralidhar said, are held at a facility in Boston that is “heavily secured.”

What It Looks Like: Veterans hope the database will help.

In 2019, a nurse at a V.A. hospital told Octavia Harris, 60, of San Antonio, about the Million Veteran Program. She signed up and said participating was a chance to help other vets and to help herself.

Ms. Harris, who retired from the Navy in 2012 after 30 years of service, said three conditions run in her family — diabetes, high blood pressure and arthritis. She is hoping that with her genetic and health information added to that of so many others, researchers will make useful discoveries.

In her family, Ms. Harris said, people died young.

“We haven’t lived beyond the age of 70,” she said. “I want to go past 70.”

A correction was made on Nov. 15, 2023: An earlier version of this article misstated the date on which the millionth veteran signed up to a database. It was Nov. 8, not Nov. 11. It also misattributed a quote. Dr. Shereef Elnahal, the under secretary of health, called the database a gift to the world, not Denis McDonough, the secretary for veterans affairs.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

Gina Kolata reports on diseases and treatments, how treatments are discovered and tested, and how they affect people. She has been a Pulitzer finalist and has written several books. [More about Gina Kolata](#)

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