

'Operation Mend' partnership offers hope for America's wounded warriors

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By Matthew Malamud

The AHA and more than 20 other national organizations have come together to promote "Joining Forces," an initiative to educate medical professionals about the common health challenges facing returning U.S. troops. As part of that effort, AHA News on a recurring basis is highlighting how hospitals are reaching out to returning veterans and their families.

Within 24 hours, wounded soldiers – many of whom have been injured by explosions from improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, and bombs – can be flown halfway across the world to Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) in San Antonio, TX, to be treated for injuries ranging from significant burns to lost limbs, eyes, ears and noses.

Those that can benefit from reconstructive surgery are then referred to the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Medical Center under a program called "Operation Mend." The goal: "providing the best care that the military and civilian world can offer for these soldiers," says Amir Rubin, UCLA Health System's chief operating officer.

UCLA and BAMC launched "Operation Mend" a year ago to provide rehabilitative and reconstructive care for U.S. soldiers severely wounded in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While BAMC is "one of the world's best burn and rehabilitation hospitals, these soldiers have some very serious sub-specialized needs and UCLA is one of the world's best tertiary hospitals," Rubin says.

Soldiers treated initially at BAMC are flown to UCLA in Los Angeles. Soldiers and their families stay free of charge at UCLA's Tiverton House, a hotel on the hospital campus. The Operation Mend medical team consults with the soldiers, then performs diagnostic testing and surgery – often multiple surgeries – due to the dramatic nature of the injuries. So far, about a dozen wounded soldiers have received care at UCLA.

"We're committed to delivering the absolute best care to our injured soldiers because they've given so much for our country," says Rubin. "When you are severely disfigured, it's hard to re-acclimate into society – to get a job, pick up your kids from school or soccer practice – and that's partly why this program is so important. We try to restore as much function as possible and the advancements in prosthetics and rehabilitation are remarkable, as are reconstructive abilities."

To learn more about Joining Forces and how your organization can get involved, go to www.joiningforcesonline.org. For more information on Operation Mend, contact UCLA Medical Center's Roxanne Moster at rmoster@mednet.ucla.edu.

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