



FINALLY SOME SUN - AND THERE'S SO MUCH TO LOOK FORWARD TO!

With the sun out and the Olympic games, Wimbledon tennis, and the Euros on, you're spoilt for choice on what to do this summer. So, a big thank you to everyone who has added their 2nd ADVANCE follow-up appointment to their 'to do list' this summer- we're excited to see you! We might leave the flips, jumps and victory dances to the professionals but you'll get a smile, a well organised and informative visit (and an endless supply of biscuits) whilst you are here with us at DMRC Stanford Hall. The data from your first follow up visit has been organised by our amazing data team and is currently being analysed by our ever-curious researchers. It takes time to go through the thousands of data points, but keep an eye on the website for publications as they are released.

As of the end of June, 378 participants have been seen for their follow up 2 appointments, that's over a third of you! We are so grateful for your dedication to ADVANCE. If you've had an email from us to say you are due for a visit, please get in touch to get booked in.

IN OTHER NEWS...

On page 2 of this newsletter you can read about our newly-formed 'Independent Scientific Advisory Group' (ISAG) and how this group of scientists, academics and clinicians can help us make the most of the data we collect from all our ADVANCE participants and help direct the study towards our goal. You'll also read about how we plan to link the ADVANCE data with other external data sources to enrich our dataset for use in the future. More details on the study's data can be found on our website [ADVANCE website](#).

LISTENING TO THE PARTICIPANTS...

On page 3 you will find an interview conducted by Jodie with one of our participants and you'll read the important insight of a soldier transitioning from military to civilian life. This article ties in nicely with an article on page 6 where our ADVANCE PhD student, Laura Grover, has explored the importance of social support for military personnel.

NEW FEATURES...

Every newsletter we want to promote charities or organisations of interest to our serving military personnel or veterans. On page 3 we have a brief introduction to a programme being run by 'The Warrior Programme'. If there are any charities or organisations you'd like us to feature in future newsletters do get in touch. We also have have a book review on page 4. Again, if there any books you'd like to recommend then let us know, or better still, write a short review for it!

Find us on
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ADVANCE - INDEPENDENT SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY GROUP (ISAG)

Earlier this year we formed our ADVANCE Independent Scientific Advisory Group (ISAG). The ISAG is a group of expert advisors who agree to provide scientific and strategic guidance to – and support for – the aims of the ADVANCE Study: to help, support and plan the best care possible for present and future generations of our injured servicemen and women. In essence, they are our ‘critical friends’.

The group do ‘what it says on the tin’! They are:

INDEPENDENT – none of the members are associated with the ADVANCE study and are completely independent.

SCIENTIFIC – Members of ISAG are scientists, clinicians, researchers, and lay members with appropriate experience in fields relevant to ADVANCE.

ADVISORY – Members are there to advise and support the Study. They provide their expert opinions, thoughts and recommendations.

GROUP – there are currently 13 members in the group and we are very grateful and honoured that they have given us time in their very busy schedules to support us in this way. It’s a truly international group with members in the United States, Australia, Canada and the UK.



We held our first all-day meeting on 28th May and it was a huge success! The ADVANCE project board members presented what ADVANCE has achieved so far and posed some questions to the ISAG such as:

- Is there anything we are not doing we should be?
- Is there any other data we should be collecting?
- How can we provide access to data and increase collaboration?

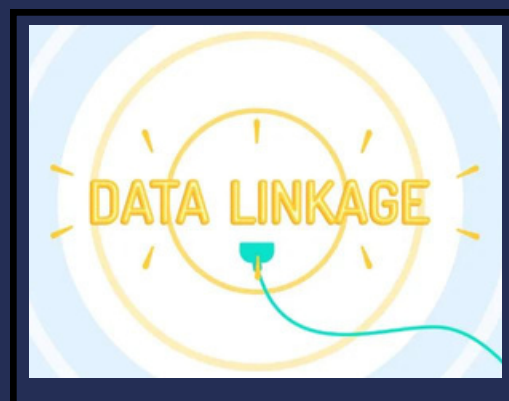
The ISAG provided advice, support, reassurance, and encouragement, as well as some ‘food for thought’. They agreed that ADVANCE is a very important and unique study, and they are committed to support us in our aim to ensure the impact of the study is felt far and wide.

ADVANCE MOVES FORWARD: DATA LINKAGE

The ADVANCE study is currently working to connect our participants’ self-reported data with external data sources, a process known as Data Linkage.

This will enable us (the study) to supplement the information provided on visit days with data already held in records, such as NHS hospital records. This enables us to build a richer dataset, strengthening the data and providing an even more powerful research tool for those analysing the data.

For example, if we can obtain your birthweight from NHS records we may be able to use that information in exploring the risk of developing cardiovascular disease. This is how world leading research can happen! We will tell you more about this in future newsletters as we finalise these connections.



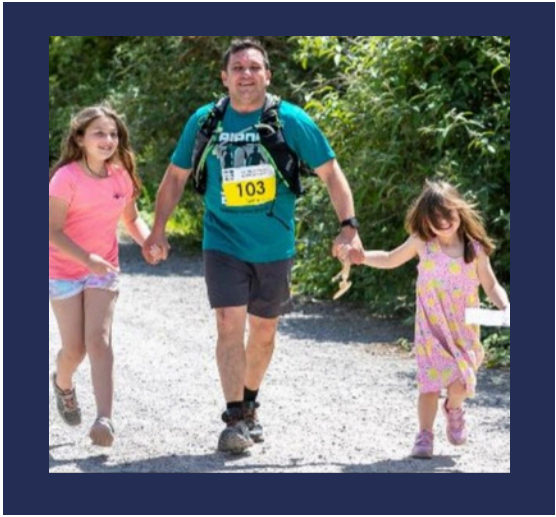
If you have any questions please do contact our data manager on e.miller@imperial.ac.uk

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW: JASON ASHFORD

TRANSITION FROM MILITARY TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Rank: CHO, Army.

“The last time I was deployed overseas was to Jordan in the Middle East, and to Canada in 2017 as a JTAC Instructor on a small term training team with the JTAC school. I was training with the safety team that facilitated the training for different battle groups that came through. It was a great deployment. I was happy in the military; the best part of it all is the mates you make through training and deployments, and we have all kept in touch. Another great part of military life is the travel, I have been to so many places and I am grateful for those experiences. When it comes to leaving military life I imagine if you had left the loop entirely you would feel a bit isolated. Those friends are for life!



I left active service on 10th May 2023, so I have been out for about a year. I have joined the reservist, training is great! Transition from military life was hard, I didn't miss it from an institutionalised side of things. It was my choice to leave the military, which is a way in a good thing, I made the decision. I wasn't in denial I was happy to be leaving.

With there being a lot going on with the house, the job, the fact that me and my wife were going through a rocky patch. My brother asked me why I wasn't bothered about it or emotional about it. I felt my family didn't particularly care about my state of mind or if anything was bothering me. They just wanted me to fall in line with what they wanted and their agendas to make their lives easier. My wife and brother asked me to seek help, I called the Help for Heroes line and I also phoned Forces Gateway the guy on the phone told me that someone cares about your mental health and things will be ok. I told them my plans, Help for Heroes had a few pathways I could follow, and they were good. Family time is a huge positive for me after leaving the army and really helped me. I think you reflect more when you leave as you have the time to, and you miss the adrenaline rush of combat life, but my civilian life is now great, I have a job as a DIO Defence Infrastructure Organisation and I am finally settled which is amazing.

“
The study seems to grow every time I come, which is great. It's all heading in the right direction. Let's see it through until the end!
”

I was initially approached years ago about the ADVANCE study, and I thought that it might help fuel the research if more people joined and took part. I also thought it was important to help future service men and women or even just the general public in years to come. There's lots of knowledge to be shared about past experience and rehabilitation for the future.

I really enjoyed the whole day when I came to visit Stanford Hall back in December 2023. Everyone is really nice and welcoming and that's fantastic. The bit I remembered most from the day was the new bit the Neuropsych tests, that was very interesting. I also had an MRI scan, so it's an amazing health check and its free. In fact, you guys pay me to come!

When it comes to the Dexa though, because the yellow ink is your body fat, I always say there something wrong with the printer, there's more there than last year as that yellow mark is looking a little smudged. It's always good to have a laugh isn't it.

The study seems to grow every time I come, which is great, every time I attend it seems to get bigger, I think it's good the direction the study is heading and it's just important that we all keep coming. I think if people stopped attending, the research would slow down, and the end game wouldn't be achieved. It's quite flexible with dates and times as well, its not like your given a small window you can pretty much pick whatever suits your job and life. “Let's see it through until the end!”

CHARITY LOOKOUT: [thewarriorprogramme](http://thewarriorprogramme.org.uk)



For more than fifteen years The Warrior Programme has been showing the Armed Forces community past and present and their families a different way to manage their emotions and develop resilience, focus and motivation. This intensive personal development training provides a structured programme which includes:

- Pre- and Post-course workshops.
- 5 half-day online or 3 full-day residential Foundation course.
- follow-up training and monthly telephone support for 12 months.

For more information please follow the link <https://www.warriorprogramme.org.uk/>

+44 (0)808 801 0898 or enquiries@warriorprogramme.org.uk

MEET THE TEAM: JODIE STEVENSON



Jodie in Marrekech for her 40th

What is your role within ADVANCE? Working out of Stanford Hall and from home, my main role is Finance Administrator. I deal with all participant claims and invoices that need paying by the charity. I also look after the recruitment side of things, booking and organising appointments for our test days. Recently I have taken on helping with some of the communications and my main roles within this are interviewing our lovely participants and editing the newsletter.

What jobs did you have before joining ADVANCE? I do have a Media and admin background, so this role is perfect for me. I used to work in car sales which really wasn't my thing.

What do you enjoy most about your job? I love meeting our participants and hearing their stories, its very humbling. Meeting and chatting to people is something I seem to be really good at..... chatterbox!

What is the biggest challenge of your ADVANCE role? I think its the responsibility, making sure you all get paid for taking part, very important! And also making sure my interviews are for the individual. Everyone's unique and our experiences affect us all in different ways, I try and capture that when talking to you all.

If you could see all our participants together, what would you say to them? Whether your story is big or small, you're all heroes to me!

What do you like doing outside of work? Well I don't have much spare time, I am a mother of 3 beautiful children, Finley, Mila, Bella and our new puppy Ozzie. So they take up most of my time, I love it but I am tired! We have recently moved to Devon to build a house and everyone is very settled and happy!

What is your favourite meal? Anything Thai, incredible food!

What is your favourite drink? If we are talking alcohol here, now the sun is out it has to be a Aperol Spritz!

What's the last book you read? Dawn French, The T**t Files. The woman is a legend!

You are stuck on a desert island - who are you taking with you? Nobody, I need some alone time! ha ha

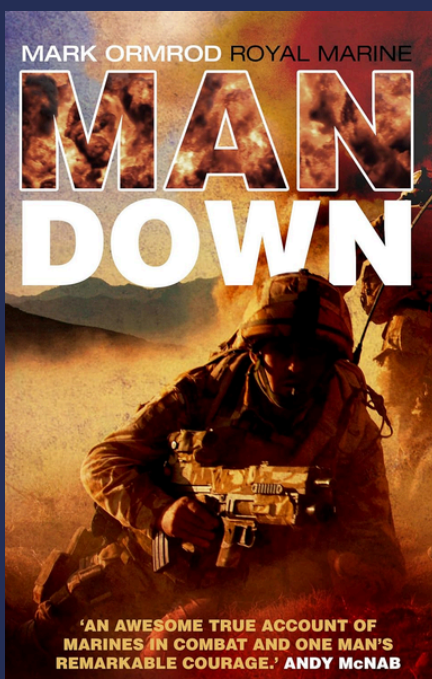
What was no. 1 in the UK charts on the day you were born? Wake me up before you go go! Wham! How very 80's!



Jodie and her family

BOOK RECOMMENDATION - Man Down by Mark Ormrod

Written by Nikki Goodman, our Clinical Project Assistant.



Mark Ormrod MBE (born 29 July 1983) is a former Royal Marine. After triggering an improvised explosive device during a routine foot patrol in 2007, he suffered severe injuries resulting in a triple amputation. He was the UK's first triple amputee to survive the Afghanistan conflict. He has since gone on to some amazing things, including writing this book.



Before I started working at DMRC I had already heard of Mark Ormrod through his charity works shown on TV. I thought that reading his book would give me an insight into military life and the journey of someone wounded in conflict. The book describes life as a Marine in training and on tour in Afghanistan in good detail – I was able to imagine the living conditions at the FOB and picture the scenes vividly. I also liked the glossary of Marine slang which has proved very useful!

Obviously, knowing about Mark's injuries means there are no 'spoilers' in the story – indeed, the first chapter starts literally with a bang – but Mark's narration of every detail makes the story of his recovery all the more remarkable. It's not one for the squeamish but the vivid descriptions make you appreciate what he went through.

Mark's struggles and determination to overcome adversity are both humbling and inspiring, and I enjoyed this book. I would definitely recommend it.

YOUR ADVANCE DAY EXPLAINED:

MRI SCAN

ADVANCE has introduced a new research avenue looking into long-term effects of head injuries on brain function within the cohort. This comprises of an Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scan and a memory and thinking assessment looking at how the brain looks and is currently functioning.

Modern brain imaging techniques allows for much more detailed images which are of significant interest for research looking into neurodegenerative conditions and brain health following head injury.

Our MRI scan comprises of 5 types of pictures which provide an insight into:

- Brain structure
- Signs of damage to blood vessels
- Inflammation
- Damage to connective tissue
- Brain communication and activity

We plan to look for potential patterns of injury to the brain between those with and without a history of head injury and overpressure exposure (blasts). Repeated MRI scans at follow up will also allow us to assess brain changes (including changes in brain shape) over time, and estimate how the brain ages over time.

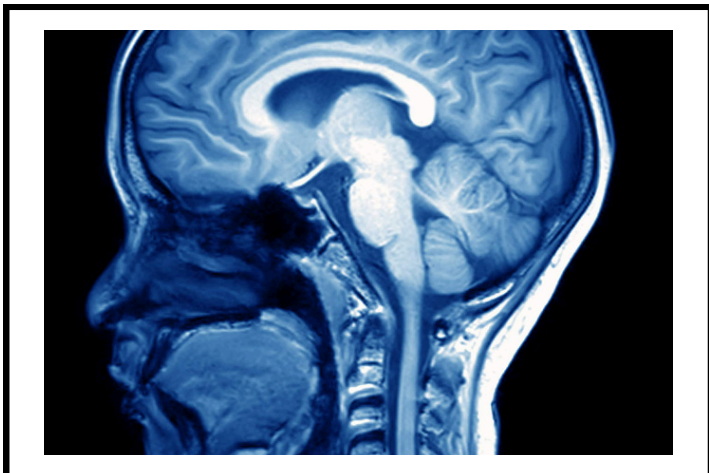
HOW DO I GET BOOKED IN FOR MY MRI

When scheduling your follow-up appointment, the admin team will inquire about your interest in TBI assessments and will conduct safety screening for MRI eligibility.

MRI scanners are big magnets therefore you won't be allowed anything metal in with you. Certain medical implants are safe, but further details may be requested.

If concerns arise, a radiographer may contact you via telephone to find out more information. If you do have metal on your clothing (e.g., zips, poppers etc), you will be provided with scrubs.

Upon arrival at the Radiology Department the radiographer will go through a final MRI safety form and determine your eligibility for the scan.



If you have any further questions regarding the MRI scan, please don't hesitate to contact the TBI team at ukstratcom-dms-dmrc-re-advtbi@mod.gov.uk. This is an exciting area of research that has gained a lot of media attention with regards to sport. We are interested to investigate the long-term outcomes of head injury within military setting.

WHAT TO EXPECT

The MRI scan lasts approximately 1 hour. The scanner is quite noisy; you will notice the pattern of these noises will change throughout. Each sequence (set of images) sounds slightly different; you can use these changes to judge how far through the scan you are.

The radiographer can play music of your choice to you during the scan, so have a playlist/genre or decade in mind, and you will be able to watch a nature scene video on a loop. During the final 10 minutes of the scan the video and music will be switched off and we will need you to stay awake.

The radiographers will notify you when this is. It can get quite chilly whilst in the scanner, but the radiographers will be happy to provide a blanket. You will be able to communicate with them throughout the scan, so if you have any problems let them know.

HOW THE SCANS ARE REPORTED

Clinical images are transferred to Imperial NHS trust where they are reported on by our neuroradiologist. Reports are then returned to us, and you will receive an email with the outcome of your MRI report.

If anything comes up on the scan that we need to let you know about you will receive a phone call from the neurologist on the study.

A results letter will then be emailed out to your MO/GP, and you will be copied in for your records.

The Importance of Social Support for Military Personnel: Insights from a Recent Review

Laura Grover, PhD student

Humans are social beings. Throughout our lives, we form bonds and thrive when surrounded by a supportive network. General population studies show that feeling supported by family and friends can improve our health and assist recovery during tough times. For military personnel who deployed during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, exposure to traumatic events can influence their health and wellbeing. Perceived social support, which is “an individual's belief that they are cared for by their family and friends”, might help to reduce negative outcomes.

ADVANCE PhD student, Laura Grover, recently conducted a review to explore how much social support these individuals perceived, how it varied based on their mental and physical health, and what other factors were linked to perceived social support.

Which Studies were Included?

The review included 35 studies involving 19,073 participants. Nearly all the studies were conducted in the US with none from the UK. Most studies used a questionnaire that measured post-deployment social support, with questions like “my family members or friends make me feel better when I am down” and “I can go to family members or friends when I need good advice.”

How Much Perceived Social Support was Reported?

The analysis revealed that personnel generally felt a moderate to high level of support. Those with amputation injuries reported the highest levels of support, while those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) had significantly lower social support scores.

Which Factors were Associated with Perceived Social Support?

Risk Factors: Having PTSD, depression, or anxiety was associated with lower levels of perceived support.

Protective Factors: Post-traumatic growth and support from fellow service members were linked to higher perceived support, highlighting the value of strong, high-quality relationships.

What are the Next Steps?

Studies in the US have shown that feeling supported by family and friends is crucial for the mental health and wellbeing of military personnel who deployed during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Expanding research beyond the US will help us to better understand and support military personnel and veterans in the UK and elsewhere. Laura is currently working on understanding social support in the ADVANCE cohort, to see how it compares with these existing studies but also to determine how best to enhance social support for the UK Armed Forces Community.

If you have any questions regarding the data above, please do contact Laura on: laura.grover@kcl.ac.uk

Also please visit her paper on the link below:

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00127-024-02685-3>



HELLO AND GOODBYE.....



Rachel

We are excited to welcome a new face to the team. Rachel Matravers joined the ADVANCE team in June as our new Clinical Research Nurse. She comes to ADVANCE with a wealth of experience and in her new role she will be responsible for completing the clinical tests and looking after you.

Rachel has only been with us for less than a month but she has already settled in and become part of our ever expanding team. If you are coming in for your visit to Stanford Hall you will meet Rachel along with the rest of the clinical team: Joc, Nikki and Mel. A warm welcome to you Rachel!

We are sadly saying goodbye to two ADVANCE team members - Molly Waldron and Maija Maskuniitty. Molly was a key member of the clinical team, focusing on making your day at the ADVANCE study the best it could be. Thank you for all your hard work Molly and we hope you have a fantastic adventure in Australia!

Maija, who was our Operations Manager, has left the study. She will remain in her ADVANCE Charity role as the charity's Executive Secretary and Operations Manager. We wish you all the best for the future.



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