DRAFT: Toxic Exposures SVAC Hearing

* 1. Criteria for selection of SME’s
  2. Qualifications of SME’s (do they all have Occ med residencies?)
  3. VA provided Training / Certification of SME’s
  4. Peer review of the work of SME’s (as a quality assurance check)
  5. The standards under which SME’s accomplish their work in making recommendations back to VBA
  6. The bibliography SME’s use for Camp Lejeune cases

The Camp Lejeune Contaminated Water (CLCW) Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) program was developed by the Veterans Health Administration to utilize highly qualified compensation and pension doctors with significant experience and training in occupational and environmental medicine to provide the best services to Veterans. The SME’s provide a medical opinion on whether the Veteran’s claimed conditions it ‘at least as likely as not’ related to time spent a Camp Lejeune. The SMEs do not adjudicate claims. The medical opinion is provided to the Veterans Benefit Administration as one piece of evidence used in adjudicating the Veteran’s claim.

All CLCW SMEs are physicians with the majority of them having post-graduate-level residency training in environmental medicine or occupational medicine. Potential candidates are identified by the Veterans Integrated Service Network/medical center directors and ultimately vested by , other SMEs, and the Office of Disability and Medical Assessment (DMA), under the Veterans Health Administration, based on credentialing rosters, qualifications and experience of an individual clinician determined by a review of his/her curriculum vitae and evaluation of his/her prior experience. This also includes a review of all credentialing and privileging components which are vital to any clinician in good standing. DMA is responsible for providing executive leadership to VHA’s disability examination programs worldwide, including traditional compensation and pension (C&P) examinations, examinations for Servicemembers, and overseas programs. The ideal candidates are those with extensive experience in occupational and environmental medicine, toxicology, and preventive medicine and a strong background working as an Independent Medical Examiner. Most of the SMEs currently work in the compensation and pension departments at various VA medical centers.

The SMEs initially complete a week-long in-person training. The topics covered include history of Camp Lejeune, Forensic Medicine Overview, Toxicological Consequences of the Major Contaminants, Health Care Law, and Review of the Service Record. This is where they become more familiar with, and discuss, the body of quality literature available to date. This small group training generally consists of 3-5 senior, experienced CLCW SMEs and 5-8 trainees. The participants observe senior SMEs complete a medical opinion; the trainees then complete multiple case studies on actual cases with oversight from those senior, experienced CLCW SMEs.

The CLCW claim is a complex process that starts with claim initiation ~~to~~ culminating with (adjudication). It is important to note that the medical opinion is only a single, but important piece of evidence used by the Veterans Benefits Administration to adjudicate the disability claim. SMEs base their evaluations for each claim on the identified condition, the condition’s onset, treatment history, and the current status of the condition. For each case, an exposure assessment is developed ~~for~~ as it pertains to the claimed condition, the total time at Camp Lejeune, the Veteran’s specific type of duty, and any known risk factors. Some of these risk factors may include post-service occupation, genetics, social history, smoking and alcohol consumption history, as well as others. SMEs review the toxicology literature that provides estimated solvent exposures within various industrial settings as well as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency oral reference dose or other standard toxicology measures. This body of literature is comprised of peer review scientific journals, published research reports and other relevant documents.

An additional internal review process is being developed and implemented using a phased in approach over the current fiscal year.