

AWARD NUMBER: W81XWH-15-1-0520

TITLE: Gulf War Illness as a Brain Autoimmune Disorder

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REPORT DATE: OCT 2018

TYPE OF REPORT: Annual

PREPARED FOR: U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command  
Fort Detrick, Maryland 21702-5012

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT: Approved for Public Release;  
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# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

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<b>1. REPORT DATE</b> OCT 2018		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Annual		<b>3. DATES COVERED</b> 9/4/2017-9/3/2018	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b>  Gulf War Illness as a Brain Autoimmune Disorder				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> W81XWH-15-1-0520	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> GW140053	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b>  Apostolos Georgopoulos, MD, PhD  E-Mail: omega@umn.edu				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  University of Minnesota Minneapolis, MN 55455-2070				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command Fort Detrick, Maryland 21702-5012				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b>  Approved for Public Release; Distribution Unlimited					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b>					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> The primary emphasis of the third year of the grant has been continued recruitment of study participants and data analysis. We have completed an additional 75 acquisitions during the third year of the grant. In addition to the two manuscripts published during the last reporting period (Georgopoulos et al. 2017 EBioMedicine 10, 3217-3225; James et al. 2017 EBioMedicine 26, 126-131), we have another manuscript in preparation that demonstrates the association between GWI symptom severity and various laboratory measures of immune system functioning and inflammation. We requested (and were awarded) a no cost extension to continue recruitment to meet our goal of 200 participants. To date, we have completed 173 of 200 planned acquisitions.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Gulf War Illness, Autoimmune, neuroimaging, genetics, biomarkers					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>  Unclassified	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>  8	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> USAMRMC
<b>a. REPORT</b>  Unclassified	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b>  Unclassified	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b>  Unclassified			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION:

GWI has affected a large number of veterans of the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War. GWI symptoms are characterized by chronic health problems, of unknown etiology. They resemble symptoms seen in various autoimmune disorders and are reflected in altered patterns of brain function. In this study, we comprehensively assess the association of GWI to autoimmune disorders using cutting-edge measures of brain structure and function, genetic analysis, and laboratory tests. In preliminary studies, we have discovered that GWI possesses a distinct functional brain pattern that is very close to that observed in a well-known autoimmune disorder, Sjogren's syndrome. Hence, the main goal of this proposal is to test the hypothesis that GWI is an autoimmune disorder. For that purpose, we are comparing the results of brain, genetic and laboratory tests in subjects with GWI to those obtained from subjects with known autoimmune disorders, to determine the extent to which GWI reflects autoimmune abnormalities. Altogether, our study will improve knowledge of GWI pathophysiology and ultimately inform diagnosis and potential treatment of GWI, e.g. along lines currently in use for treating autoimmune disorders.

2. **KEYWORDS:** Gulf War Illness, autoimmune, neuroimaging, genetics, biomarkers

## 3. ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

### ▪ **What were the major goals of the project?**

The major goals of the project are to assess and compare 1) brain structure and function, 2) blood inflammatory and immune markers; 3) HLA genes; and 4) cognitive, mental health, neurological and general standardized clinical status in veterans with Gulf War Illness relative to veterans with autoimmune disorders.

### ▪ **What was accomplished under these goals?**

During this reporting period, we have continued to recruit study participants and have completed an additional 75 acquisitions.

### ▪ **What opportunities for training and professional development has the project provided?**

Nothing to report.

### ▪ **How were the results disseminated to communities of interest?**

Findings supported by this grant were disseminated in the 2018 CDMRP Gulf War Illness Research Program Booklet (June 2018).

- **What do you plan to do during the next reporting period to accomplish the goals?**

We received a no cost extension to continue recruitment, data analysis, and dissemination of study findings.

#### 4. **IMPACT:**

- **What was the impact on the development of the principal discipline(s) of the project?**

The findings from the grant thus far have demonstrated similar brain signatures in autoimmune disorders and GWI as well as a genetic lack of protection involving immune-related genes in the development of GWI. In particular, genes that have been shown to protect against various autoimmune disorders are also protective against GWI. These findings implicate immune system functioning in the development of GWI and point to exposure to particular antigens in genetically vulnerable individuals as likely contributing to GWI. This opens avenues for potential treatment of GWI along the lines of immunotherapy.

- **What was the impact on other disciplines?**

The findings from this study led to investigations about immune-related genetic involvement in brain aging. Two published papers have demonstrated that the same immune-related genes that are generally lacking in veterans with GWI and contribute to brain atrophy in GWI via inability to eradicate circulating antigens are associated with brain atrophy and neural network variability in healthy brain aging (James et al. 2018 EBioMedicine 29, 31-37; James et al., 2018 EBioMedicine 35, 288-294).

- **What was the impact on technology transfer?**

Nothing to report.

- **What was the impact on society beyond science and technology?**

Despite 25 years of research, GWI has been poorly understood and even attributed to psychological distress, hampering efforts to effectively treat affected veterans. The findings from this grant substantiate GWI as a medical condition, highlight genetic susceptibility to GWI, and offer insights regarding potential treatments. Taken together, these findings legitimize the difficulties of GWI veterans and offer hope for treatment to veterans who have suffered for decades.

5. **CHANGES/PROBLEMS:**

- **Changes in approach and reasons for change**

Nothing to report.

- **Actual or anticipated problems or delays and actions or plans to resolve them**

Although we completed 75 acquisitions during the current reporting period and 173 to date, we have not yet met our recruitment goal of 200 participants total; thus, we requested a no-cost extension to continue recruitment. During this reporting period one of our measures of brain function, MEG, experienced catastrophic malfunction requiring substantial and ongoing repair. We have continued to acquire other brain imaging data from study participants who have expressed willingness to return to complete the MEG when the scanner is fully functional.

- **Changes that had a significant impact on expenditures**

Nothing to report.

- **Significant changes in use or care of human subjects, vertebrate animals, biohazards, and/or select agents**

Nothing to report.

- **Significant changes in use or care of human subjects.**

Nothing to report.

- **Significant changes in use or care of vertebrate animals.**

Not applicable.

- **Significant changes in use of biohazards and/or select agents**

Not applicable.

6. **PRODUCTS:**

- **Publications, conference papers, and presentations**

Journal publications.

Nothing to report.

- **Books or other non-periodical, one-time publications.**

Nothing to report.

- **Other publications, conference papers, and presentations.**

Nothing to report.

- **Website(s) or other Internet site(s)**

<http://brain.umn.edu>

- **Technologies or techniques**

Nothing to report.

- **Inventions, patent applications, and/or licenses**

Nothing to report.

- **Other Products**

We have developed a database in order to facilitate data analysis and dissemination of research findings.

## 7. PARTICIPANTS & OTHER COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS

- **What individuals have worked on the project?**

Apostolos Georgopoulos: No change

Brian Engdahl: No change

Lisa James: No change

Arthur Leuthold: No change

Adam Carpenter: No change

- **Has there been a change in the active other support of the PD/PI (s) or senior/key personnel since the last reporting period?**

Nothing to report.

- **What other organizations were involved as partners?**

Nothing to report.

#### **8. SPECIAL REPORTING REQUIREMENTS**

Nothing to report.