A 30 something male patient suddenly bursts into anger in a normally quiet waiting room, enraged at having to wait another 10 minutes to be seen by their doctor. A mother of two struggling with depression and intense anxiety. A 60 year-old suffers from chronic pain in his lower back and knees, neither of which respond to a normal treatment regimen. These seemingly disparate patients may share a common denominator that is key to understanding them both as patients and people. And to acknowledge this experience may help a clinician connect with their patients more deeply and authentically and help them live more meaningful and fulfilling lives. To ignore this experience may lead a patient to close themself off and ultimately avoid seeking needed help. In many cases, the path to discovering this complex and important set of experiences in a patient can begin with a simple question, included in any standard patient exam or history:

“Have you or any loved ones ever served in the military?”

While many questions that we incorporate into a patient history are revealing of a specific aspect of a patient’s life or health, the answer to the question of military service may represent the tip of an iceberg that can potentially provide insight into a patient’s medical risk factors, family history, employment history, exposures, mental health risk factors, and much more. This is, in large part, due to what the military may represent to those who have chosen to serve. Regardless of branch, length of service, title, or rank, the military is for many a calling and for most it becomes a culture and a way of life. In addition, the experiences of military service members are rarely lived in a vacuum, and often extend to family members, loved ones, and friends. To those who have had little or no experience with the military, the enormous implications of having served or of having a loved one that has served can be difficult to understand, making it all the more important for those on the front lines of medical care to be specifically trained on identifying those with connections to the military and working with them accordingly. To me, the importance of identifying military service can be broken up into three essential parts: identifying medical risk factors, understanding a patient as a whole person, and connecting someone to benefits and services if they are willing.
By its nature, military service often involves intense physical activity, exposure to potentially hazardous materials, mental stress, and in some cases putting oneself directly into harm’s way. In this sense, screening for military service can provide valuable background information in establishing a differential diagnosis for patients with a wide range of acute or chronic medical problems. For example, I took care of a gentleman with a number of neoplastic processes that were seemingly unconnected until we discovered he had spent two years in the 60’s transporting Agent Orange in 50 gallon barrels.

Even outside of the realm of physical health, military service is an invariably important and often transformative experience for patients and their families. While anyone who has had a 15-turned-45 minute conversation with an older vet knows this, it is important to keep in mind with current generations of service members and their families - especially if we hope to apply many of the hard-wrought lessons we learned with those returning from Vietnam. Finally, while the prospect of navigating the military medical benefits program is intimidating to even the most seasoned healthcare practitioner, a simple conversation reminding veterans that there is support and benefits available to them … earned through their service, can often make a world of difference in helping an individual or family.

While the question is simple, the benefits of asking it and generously listening to the answer are potentially vast in understanding an increasingly prevalent group of patients seen outside VA clinics. I now routinely ask the question of all my patients and know I will be a better doctor because of it.