

Trauma, just a click away

Ros Wynne-Jones

Treating the psychological scars of war like whiplash is an insult to the soldiers marked by their service

Andrew Watson, the 25-year-old former private in the Logistics Corps, who jumped to his death 10 days ago, never really left Basra. Traumatized by the memory of retrieving the bodies of two colleagues he had seen blown up by a mine, and by the experience of removing dead babies from bombed buildings, he was already dead to the world when he came back from Iraq, his mother said.

Suffering from undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), one of his last acts was to stand in front of the television at his home in London saluting the parade of flag-draped military coffins as they passed through the market town of Wootton Bassett.

Andrew Watson died at Kings College Hospital - a cruel irony given that just a stone's throw away is a world-class unit for the treatment of PTSD - the Centre for Anxiety Disorders and Trauma. I was treated there in 2000, after reporting from the scene of a civilian massacre in East Timor had left me unable to sleep, eat or leave the house, my once active life reduced to the brief respites between flashbacks and panic attacks. The treatment gave me my life back.

As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq grind on, the list of soldiers - and journalists and aid workers - with PTSD will grow. Tonight's Panorama investigation into the UK's burgeoning "trauma industry" is timely and shocking, revealing the NHS is now treating an estimated 220,000 people a year for PTSD - more than twice the number of soldiers in the

entire British army.

No Win, No Fee Britain, it seems, now suffers PTSD at the click of a mouse, with personal injury claims websites listing the symptoms and then a Start Claim button. Another cruel irony for Andrew Watson: his mother says he was desperate for help but was unable to find his way into any system of treatment.

In the film, Allan Little, a veteran BBC war correspondent who suffered the symptoms of PTSD after losing his friend and cameraman, Tihomir Tunukovic, to an anti-aircraft shell in Bosnia, interviews a number of civilian casualties - including a woman diagnosed with PTSD after the taxi she was in was shunted at low speed by another car. The payouts can be up to a million pounds for symptoms that are hard to prove or dispute. And this is where the PTSD industry comes in - not the doctors, psychiatrists and psychologists who treat it, but a corrupting compensation culture as lax and exploitable as the parliamentary expenses system.

PTSD is subjective by its very nature. There were other witnesses to the same massacre I saw, who did not suffer PTSD. I have experienced other deeply disturbing and terrifying situations in war zones that did not return to haunt me. But for ambulance-chasing personal injury lawyers, a largely unprovable, subjective syndrome is a gift. It is becoming a key component of the £7bn a year personal accident business.

The excellent treatment I received meant I was able to return to reporting. But I wonder whether I would have got better had I been engaged in a long and potentially brutal fight for compensation with my employers, reliving the trauma in the courtroom.

Mrs Watson wasn't making any special pleading for her son. "It's what

soldiers do." When he jumped from his block of flats, Andrew Watson didn't need compensating for his experiences in Iraq, but he badly needed help. Can there really be more trauma on the streets of Britain than on the battlefields of Afghanistan? Making PTSD as prevalent as whiplash is an insult to all the soldiers who carry the scars of past service, not least those whose personal experience of trauma has simply made it impossible for them to go on living.

Panorama: The Trauma Industry is on BBC1 tonight
www.roswynne-jones.com

