

Study reveals loss of 10,300 years of Kiwi life from South African War

March 26 2021



A statue of a New Zealand soldier killed in action in the South African war.
Credit: Government Gardens, Rotorua

A new study has revealed a more damaging impact of the South African War to New Zealand military personnel than was previously thought.

The study, titled "Health impacts for New Zealand [military personnel](#) from the South African War of 1899 to 1902," found that both deaths and disease among New Zealand [personnel](#) were more substantive than was documented in previous literature.

Massey University College of Humanities and Social Sciences Professor Glyn Harper worked alongside Public Health Professor Nick Wilson from Otago University in another collaboration combining their epidemiological and historical expertise.

"This article is the result of two years of work however; Nick Wilson, Christine Clement, George Thomson and I have been collaborating on this type of research for about a decade now," Professor Harper says.

"This study builds on previous joint work by the researchers and is part of further work on the [long term health](#) and social implications of New Zealand's involvement in wars of the 20th Century."

This study aimed to gain a better understanding of the impacts on illness and injuries as a consequence of New Zealanders in the war.

From analysis of online military records, the study reveals that 39 percent of personnel were estimated to have had some form of reported illness or injury; in marked contrast with the 3 percent labeled wounded in official historical records.

The researchers also identified ten additional war-attributable deaths and removed three non-attributable deaths, to give an updated New Zealand total of 239 war-attributable deaths.

Given the average age of [death](#) of 26 years during this war, this equates to the loss of 10,300 years of life for those New Zealanders who died as result of their service in the South African War.

Professor Wilson says governments need to recognize that wars can have long term impacts on their military personnel.

"War has a long shadow and it is important to learn the lessons of history so governments think seriously before committing their citizens to overseas wars."

He adds that if governments do get involved "they must prepare their military personnel properly, unlike as in this war, where training and support was inadequate."

Their research also found much of the [health](#) burden could have been prevented if the personnel had been better prepared, properly equipped, and appropriately supported with access to basic medical care says Professor Wilson.

In particular, the deaths from disease were particularly high at 59 percent of all deaths—far more than deaths from bullets or shells at 30 percent.

The study concludes that there is a need to describe historical conflicts in further detail so that their adverse [health impacts](#) are properly understood.

More information: Health impacts for New Zealand military personnel from the South African War of 1899–1902. *NZMJ*. www.nzma.org.nz/journal-article/can-war-of-1899-1902

Provided by Massey University

Citation: Study reveals loss of 10,300 years of Kiwi life from South African War (2021, March

26) retrieved 20 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-03-reveals-loss-years-kiwi-life.html>

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