Six years into combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, the number of returning wounded soldiers continues to rise, even as veterans of earlier wars struggle with health problems from their own service or from unrelated illnesses and aging. In a long-standing partnership, Emory medical faculty comprise virtually all the medical staff at the Atlanta Veterans Affairs Medical Center. These faculty head nationally recognized clinical programs there, and they bring in research dollars that place the Atlanta facility among the nation’s top VA centers. Their goal is simple: to serve the nation’s heroes today and improve health care for past, present, and future veterans.

Robert Pollet (right) directs a multidisciplinary, biomedical research program at the Atlanta VAMC, including one of 12 centers of excellence in rehabilitation research in the nation.
The diagnosis caught Hank Bishop completely by surprise. The tall, lanky carpenter had never had a homosexual encounter, he was pushing 60, and except for four years in the Army, he had spent his entire life in the same peaceful south Georgia town. But when Hank arrived at the HIV/AIDS clinic at Atlanta VA Medical Center (VAMC), director David Rimland was not surprised. Almost half the veterans now seen in the clinic have been infected through heterosexual transmission. Like Bishop, roughly two-thirds have advanced disease at the time of diagnosis. And like Bishop, many also have substance abuse, depression, and/or other mental health problems.

Rimland, an Emory medical professor specializing in infectious disease, established the clinic in 1982, the year a mysterious new epidemic was first given the name AIDS, three years before the first test would be available for HIV, and four years before the first anti-viral medicine would appear. The clinic grew rapidly, along with the epidemic. Last year, Rimland and a couple of Emory colleagues, plus a number of CDC volunteer physicians, followed more than 1,200 HIV-positive patients, all veterans, from throughout Georgia, South Carolina, and parts of Alabama. The clinic is the largest in any VA hospital in the country and certainly one of the most sophisticated.

Bishop participates in clinical trials headed by Emory physicians working at the VAMC, including one involving a new antiviral drug. Thanks to the Atlanta VAMC and his Emory physicians, Bishop is back home, working, spending Sunday afternoons with his grandchildren, and feeling better physically and emotionally than he has in years.
Going to lung school

Emory lung specialist Rafael Perez founded and directs the pulmonary rehab program at the Atlanta VA Medical Center (VAMC). The only such VA program in north Georgia, it meets a big need. Veterans are about three times more likely to suffer from tobacco-related lung disease than non-veterans, perhaps in part because soldiers like Rich Kessler were once given cigarettes along with their rations.

Forty years and almost half a million cigarettes after serving in Vietnam, the 62-year-old man was so short of breath from emphysema that he seldom left home. As his overall health declined, his local doctor referred him to the VAMC.

Perez expects a lot from his patients. Four days a week for four weeks, Kessler underwent endurance training and “lung school.” His medications were reformulated and supplemented with oxygen. He met his first treadmill in a cramped on-site “gym” and started conditioning his body to work better within the limits of his lung impairment. He quit smoking after participating in a smoking-cessation program.

Lung school included techniques for how to breathe better during specific activities, advice on lung-related nutrition and medication, and tricks to lower oxygen demand (rearranging furniture to avoid having to walk around it, for example). Since chronic lung disease can’t be cured, the goal of pulmonary rehab is to improve function and quality of life and slow disease progression, says Perez. He warns patients, “I can’t work miracles.” Kessler disagrees. Driving downtown to meet his buddies for coffee, laughing at their jokes without wheezing, seems pretty miraculous to him.

Forty years and almost half a million cigarettes after serving in Vietnam, the 62-year-old man from Cumming, Georgia, was so short of breath from emphysema that he seldom left home.
Like cigarettes, alcohol takes a heavy toll on the lungs, says pulmonologist David Guidot, who directs the Emory Alcohol and Lung Biology Center at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He is studying the relationship between alcohol abuse and low lung levels of glutathione, an antioxidant compound.