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Women pay painful price for equal military training

BY MICHAEL EVANS, DEFENCE EDITOR

YOUNG female recruits to the Armed Forces are not tough enough to be treated on a par with their male colleagues, a report claimed yesterday.

Too many young women were being injured in training, the independent Adult Learning Inspectorate said, and called for a rethink of the "gender-free" policy. The previous "gender-fair" policy, which took account of the "weaker sex", was reckoned to be contrary to equal opportunities legislation.

In a report that criticised much of the culture behind Armed Forces' training, the inspectorate, which carried out checks on all the training establishments, said that the military's interpretation was to treat everyone the same. In the case of female recruits, the gender-free approach had led to record levels of injuries.

It recommended reverting to gender-fair training. The injuries had also coincided with the fact that recruits often joined the Armed Forces "unfit, overweight or poorly nourished".

In women, fractures of the tibia (shin bone) had risen over a five-year period from 12.6 per 10,000 personnel to 231.2. Stress fractures of the feet also increased significantly among female recruits.

During the gender-fair period of training, which ended in 1998, female trainees suffered 467 injuries per 10,000, compared with 118 among their male colleagues. After gender-free training was introduced, men's injuries rose to 147, but women's injuries went up to 1,113 per 10,000.

After the publication of the inspectorate's report, which was commissioned by the Ministry of Defence to examine training across the Services, Lieutenant-General Anthony Palmer, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (personnel), said that the issue of gender-free training was being reviewed.

The report said that the problem of injuries in the Services had been "exacerbated by change from a gender-fair policy, in which women were set training goals appropriate to their physique, to a gender-free approach, prompted erroneously by a conviction that equality of opportunity demands it".

When gender-free training was introduced in 1998, the Government

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declared that it was another step in efforts to provide equality of opportunity for all. The old system, which required men to run 1.5 miles in 13min 15sec but allowed women 15min 15sec, was perceived to be no longer legally defensible on the grounds of discrimination.

General Palmer said that it was the Services' responsibility to ensure proper duty of care for all trainees, including "protecting them from injury".

Military sources said that a reversal to the gender-fair approach was unlikely to affect the promotion prospects for female officers, because they required "more brain than brawn". For non-commissioned officers, there might be fewer openings for jobs that needed physical strength. Seventy per cent of jobs in the Army are open currently to women.

Last week the Commons Defence Committee issued a critical report into the duty of care after four young recruits died at the Deepcut barracks.

ON REPORT: HOW ARMY TRAINING CAMPS FAILED

- Stereotyping of gender, nationality and race, inappropriate language and too lax an attitude towards harassment and bullying were "still too widely accepted". Pin-ups were still displayed
- At some training centres poor work was punished by locker-trashing. At the Royal Marines' establishment at Lympstone, Devon, trivial offences were punished with "tanking" — being forced to jump into an outdoor tank of murky water
- Significantly more army personnel under 20 committed suicide than in the Royal Navy and the RAF. General Palmer said it was due to higher numbers of less well-educated recruits
- Decisions at the top about bullying and harassment were "too loosely connected to what happens on the ground"
- Some barracks were "little better than slums"
- At Catterick, North Yorkshire, inspectors found unguarded weapons in recruits' sleeping quarters during meals and live rounds routinely discarded in undergrowth in exercise areas
- Fewer than half of instructors received training; some saw the job as no more than "baby-sitting"

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Injuries per 10,000 personnel over a five-year period

INJURY:	GENDER FAIR		GENDER FREE	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Achilles tendonitis	5.3	12.6	4.8	57.8
Knee pain	58.0	50.5	45.0	72.3
Back pain	31.0	151.7	21.0	202.3
Tibial pain	0.7	37.8	43.0	332.4
Stress fracture tibia	5.3	12.6	16.0	231.2
Stress fracture foot	8.8	50.5	13.0	101.2
Stress fracture pubis	0.2	126.0	1.6	101.2
Stress fracture femur	0.01	25.2	3.2	14.5
ALL INJURIES	118.0	467.0	147.0	1,113.0