The Army and Air Force—the focus of GAO's review—did not comply with DOD's force health protection and surveillance policies for many active duty servicemembers, including the policies that they be assessed before and after deploying overseas, that they receive certain immunizations, and that health-related documentation be maintained in a centralized location.

GAO's review of 1,071 servicemembers' medical records from a universe of 8,742 at selected Army and Air Force installations participating in overseas operations disclosed that 38 to 98 percent of servicemembers were missing one or both of their health assessments and as many as 36 percent were missing two or more of the required immunizations.

GAO found that many servicemembers' medical records did not include health assessments found in DOD's centralized database. Similarly, DOD also did not maintain a complete, centralized database of servicemembers' health assessments and immunizations. Health-related documentation missing from the centralized database ranged from 0 to 63 percent for pre-deployment assessments, 11 to 75 percent for post-deployment assessments, and 8 to 93 percent for immunizations. There was no effective quality assurance program at the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs or at the Army or Air Force that helped ensure compliance with policies. GAO believes that the lack of such a program was a major cause of the high rate of noncompliance. Continued noncompliance with these policies may result in servicemembers deploying with health problems or delays in obtaining care when they return. Finally, DOD's centralized deployment database is still missing the information needed to track servicemembers' movements in the theater of operations. By July 2003, the department's data center had begun receiving location-specific deployment information from the services and is currently reviewing its accuracy and completeness.

GAO's report recommended that DOD establish an effective quality assurance program that will ensure that the military services comply with the force health protection and surveillance policies for all servicemembers. DOD agreed with the recommendation and outlined a number of actions the military services are already taking to implement their quality assurance programs. While we view these actions as responsive to our recommendation, the effectiveness of these actions to ensure compliance will depend on follow-through by DOD and the services.