

**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

Memorandum

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From: Under Secretary for Health (10)

Subj: VA Health Care Today

To: VHA Staff

1. In VHA we are forward-looking and continuously improving, directing our attentions and energies toward new care models, new technologies and much more. It occurs to me that as we begin 2014, this is the appropriate time to look back at our accomplishments, and to extend a sincere thank you to VHA employees for your hardwork, commitment, and achievement in serving our Nation's Veterans.
2. The attached document "VA Health Care Today" provides a look at how far we have come in a short period of time. Thank you for all that you have done to make this a better health care system.
3. Please share "VA Health Care Today" within your teams, and join me in celebrating our work in making VA the best choice in health care for Veterans. Thank you for honoring the service and empowering the health of our Nation's Veterans.



Robert A. Petzel, M.D.

VA HEALTH CARE TODAY

February 2014

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has evolved dramatically in the past several years due to the hard work and dedication of VHA employees. Today, Veterans are at the center of our attention as we work, not as individuals, but as a team of professionals. We are working together to shift from a problem-based health care system, to one that is personalized, proactive and patient-driven. Every decision we make or new program that we develop is fueled by our drive to provide personalized, proactive, patient-driven health care to Veterans. The following is a look at how far we have come in a short period of time.

High Quality Care

VHA is committed to providing the high quality, safe and effective health care Veterans have earned and deserve. We have established a record of safe, exceptional care that is consistently recognized by independent reviews, organizations and experts. As a result, VA health care performance compares favorably with the Nation on most measures of quality and safety, and patients at VA facilities have comparable or higher satisfaction with VA services to those in non-VA facilities.

Every VA medical facility is accredited by The Joint Commission—the independent, non-profit panel that ensures the quality of U.S. health care by its intensive evaluation of more than 20,000 health care organizations. In 2012, The Joint Commission recognized 19 VA hospitals as top performers, and in 2013, recognized 32, an increase that illustrates our commitment to continuous improvement.

VHA has become a leader in using data to improve health care systems and processes. This past year, we launched the VHA Reporting and Metrics Portal (RAMP) at vharamp.vssc.med.va.gov. RAMP provides VHA employees a searchable database of nearly 200 reporting tools. This advancement is the result of numerous collaborations among VHA employees that share the commitment to drive innovation and improvement.

We continue to operate with unmatched transparency in public and private sector healthcare, fostering a culture that reports and evaluates errors in order to avoid repeating them in the future. Further enhancing transparency and accountability, VHA posts online comparisons of all VA medical centers based on patient outcomes at www.hospitalcompare.va.gov and www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov.

Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACT)

Today, Veterans experience primary care at VA a lot differently than they did five years ago. Every patient is assigned a PACT team that they can count on to help coordinate and personalize their care. Every PACT team includes a primary care provider, clinical pharmacist, RN care manager, LPN or medical assistant and clerk. A Veteran can expect their PACT to help them utilize health care services, including eHealth technologies, which are necessary to optimize their health and well-being. Over the past 2 years, VA has made this possible by expanding primary care program staffing and setting standards for PACT teams at all VA medical centers. Since the implementation of PACT, access to primary care has improved and the number of encounters with Veterans has increased by 50 percent, mostly due to telephone, secure messaging and group encounters. This translates to more Veterans getting more health care services.



Homelessness

One homeless Veteran is one too many. That's why VA set the ambitious goal to end Veterans' homelessness in 2015. VHA has dramatically increased resources, programs and more effective outreach in communities throughout the country. Prevention, clinical screening at all of our VA hospitals and our "no wrong door approach" means we're better at reaching at-risk Veterans. In fact, in FY 2013, nearly 260,000 homeless or at-risk Veterans accessed services through VHA (23 percent more than the year before) and more than 99,000 were assessed by VHA's homeless programs. In addition, as a result of the innovative strategies and aggressive outreach of VHA's specialized homeless programs, we succeeded in permanently housing over 42,000 homeless Veterans and their families.

The story gets even better when you look at the overall progress of ending Veterans homelessness. As a result of the work of VA and its partners, the number of homeless Veterans in the United States has decreased by more than 23 percent since 2009.

Mental Health Care

VHA has been aggressive in addressing the mental health needs of Veterans. Recent initiatives include:

- **Mental Health Hiring Initiative:** VHA has hired more than 3,800 clinical mental health providers as part of a hiring initiative that ended in June 2013, and more than 800 peer specialists and peer apprentices have joined our workforce.
- **Mental Health Summits:** This past summer, VA medical centers nationwide hosted mental health summits to enhance positive working relationships with community partners.
- **Veterans Crisis Line:** Our Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-TALK, press 1) continues to be a phenomenal success. Since its inception in July 2007, the Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-TALK, press 1) has received more than 975,000 calls, more than 128,000 chats, as well as more than 15,000 texts, and has saved the lives of more than 32,500 Veterans who were in imminent danger. In FY 2013, VHA increased the capacity of the Veterans Crisis Line by 50 percent to help ensure that Veterans in crisis can readily reach help.
- **Make the Connection:** In FY 2013, VA continued expanding the "Make the Connection" national public awareness campaign to promote mental health resources to Veterans and their families.
- **AboutFace:** VA's *AboutFace* campaign introduces viewers to Veterans from all eras who have experienced PTSD and turned their lives around with treatment. Through personal videos, Veterans candidly describe how they knew they had PTSD, how it affected the people they loved, why they didn't get help right away, what finally caused them to seek treatment, what treatment is like, and how treatment helps.
- **VA/DoD PTSD Coach Mobile App:** The VA/DoD PTSD Coach mobile application (app) has helped more than 126,000 users connect with important mental health information and resources.
- **Community Partnerships:** VHA worked with the Department of Health and Human Services to help identify potential local community resources to improve Veterans' access to mental health services. As a result, VHA enhanced access to mental health care by establishing 24 VA pilot agreements with clinics in local communities to improve access to mental health services.

Connected Health

Today's VA provides Veteran patients and VA health care teams with even more ways to connect and ensure 21st Century health care through the use of technology. This year, we were honored to have VA, representing all of its 151 VA medical centers, named to the 2013 "Most Wired" Hospitals list—an event that marks the first time that all VA medical centers nationwide have achieved the honor. The list is the result of a national survey aimed at ranking hospitals which are leveraging health information



technology (HIT) in new and innovative ways. Several of our programs – which provide benefits to Veterans, health care professionals and Caregivers alike – are outlined below.

- **My HealthVet:** Over the past 10 years, VA has emphasized patient-centered innovations including My HealthVet (www.myhealth.va.gov), an e-portal suite of tools for Veterans and Caregivers that provides a secure web-based Personal Health Record (PHR), patient access to personal health information from the VA Electronic Health Record, the ability to download and share personal health information using the VA Blue Button, online services such as e-prescription refills, trusted health education resources, and Secure Messaging between patients and their VA health care teams.
- **Secure Messaging:** Today, we are communicating securely online with patients through VA's Secure Messaging accessible through My HealthVet. In FY 2013, we expanded use of Secure Messaging in primary, specialty, and surgical care and successfully launched implementations in mental health, dentistry, and rehabilitation and prosthetic services. Over 800,000 Veterans have opted-in for Secure Messaging and more than 8.2 million messages have been initiated through Secure Messaging.
- **Blue Button:** VA Blue Button allows Veterans to access and download all of their available personal health information from My HealthVet into a single electronic file that can be read, printed or saved on any computer. In FY 2013, we expanded and enhanced VA Blue Button features, adding several new categories of information from the VA Electronic Health Record, including patient access to clinical notes.
- **Mobile Apps:** We are leveraging mobile health technology to provide Veterans with additional opportunities to become active partners in their health care. In FY 2013, VHA launched three patient-facing pilots (Family Caregiver, Veteran Appointment Request and MyStory) – comprised of 12 Apps in all – to evaluate how Apps increase convenient access to health care, improve patient engagement and strengthen communication among Veterans, Family Caregivers and VA clinicians.
- **Home Telehealth:** VHA's home telehealth program aims to make the patient's home the preferred place to receive care, whenever possible. In FY 2013, our home telehealth program supported 125,000 Veterans, with 39,000 avoiding long-term institutional care as a result of these services.
- **VA's Specialty Care Access Network-Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes (SCAN-ECHO):** Through VA's SCAN-ECHO initiative, Veterans and their primary care team use videoconferencing technology to seek expertise from specialists located 100-500 miles away. In FY 2013, we expanded SCAN ECHO to 46 rural sites of care with more than 100 participating rural primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants.
- **Point of Care Self Service Kiosks:** Kiosks provide Veterans with the ability to check-in for clinic appointments quickly and easily using their Veterans Identification Card. In FY 2013, more than 3.46 million patient interactions took place at more than 1,900 kiosks presently installed at 46 sites and their associated community-based outpatient clinics.

Veteran Experience

We're enhancing the Veteran health care experience by providing more options for care and greater access to providers and information. Recent initiatives include:

- **VA and Indian Health Service Partner on National Reimbursement Agreement:** In FY 2013, VA and the Indian Health Service (IHS) partnered on a joint national agreement that increases access to health care services for American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans, particularly those in highly rural areas.



- **Veteran Transportation Service:** Veteran Transportation Service (VTS) provides transportation for Veterans with special needs and Veterans who do not have transportation to and from their outpatient appointments. In FY 2013, VHA expanded VTS to 60 sites throughout the system.
- **Women Veterans Hotline:** In April 2013, VA launched a new hotline —1-855-VA-WOMEN — to receive and respond to questions from Veterans, their families and Caregivers about the many VA services and resources available to women Veterans.
- **Veterans Justice Outreach:** We are continuing to develop strategies to link justice-involved Veterans with VA substance use, mental health, and other clinical services. In 2013, we launched the Veterans Reentry Search Service, a web-based system that court, jail, and prison staff can use to identify Veterans among their inmate or defendant populations.
- **Personalized Health Benefits Handbook:** In 2013, VHA successfully completed distribution of personalized health benefits handbook to all enrolled Veterans. Since inception, we have mailed more than 7 million handbooks and continue to mail this valuable resource to new enrollees.
- **Affordable Care Act:** In FY 2013, we launched an awareness campaign and a new website at www.va.gov/aca, to help Veterans and their families understand the Affordable Care Act.
- **Million Hearts:** VHA, the Department of Health and Human Services and 12 other Federal agencies are combining efforts to promote the Million Hearts campaign —a national initiative that has set a goal of preventing one million heart attacks and strokes by 2017. The Million Hearts campaign focuses on empowering Americans with health tools and information that lead to heart-healthy choices.

Research and Development

Our researchers have led groundbreaking studies into the origins and treatments of hundreds of conditions that affect Veterans. In the lab, at the bedside and in the operating room, our team is changing the practice of medicine, expanding treatment options and achieving superb outcomes benefitting the way care is delivered around the world. For example:

- We partnered with more than 200,000 Veterans to learn more about how genes affect health as part of VA's Million Veteran Program, a program where Veterans can volunteer to link their DNA with their health information. Over the next 5 to 7 years, the MVP database is expected to develop new knowledge that may eventually lead to better treatments and preventive measures for many diseases, including common illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.
- We played a key role in University of Pittsburgh-led research on a brain-computer system that enabled a woman with total paralysis to control a robotic arm using only her thoughts.
- We collaborated with researchers in Europe and Israel to develop and test a new type of artificial pancreas that could lead to major improvements in care for diabetes, and that promises to impact cell therapy for a variety of other chronic health conditions.
- We partnered with the Department of Defense to establish two joint research consortia, at a combined investment of \$107 million to research the diagnosis and treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI) over a five-year period.
- We published results from a major study on treatment of rheumatoid arthritis that showed that use of two inexpensive drugs, sulfasalazine and hydroxychloroquine, was as effective as the expensive biological response modifier etanercept when added to methotrexate treatment in patients with rheumatoid arthritis who had active disease despite methotrexate therapy.
- We found that many Veterans suffering from blast concussions may have hormone deficiencies that mimic some of the symptoms of PTSD and depression, underscoring the value of hormone-based treatments for traumatic brain injury.



- We published new data indicating that Veterans exposed to Agent Orange are not only at higher risk for prostate cancer, but also more likely to have aggressive forms of the disease— information that could help guide screening and treatment.
- We reported that infections acquired in the hospital are less likely to occur when acute-care patients are bathed daily with a simple, inexpensive antiseptic.

Our Roadmap to Excellence

In FY 2013, we launched the VHA 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, our roadmap for taking our next steps to excellence. In order to fulfill VHA's mission of providing exceptional care that improves the health and well-being of the Nation's Veterans, VHA laid out three key goals:

1. Provide Veterans personalized, proactive, patient-driven health care;
2. Achieve measurable improvements in health outcomes; and
3. Align resources to deliver sustained value to Veteran.

