Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center

VA Star

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Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic • Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic, Lufkin • Conroe VA Outpatient Clinic
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State-of-the-Art Surgical Program Also Offers Advanced Options for Female Veterans

HOUSTON – Surgeons at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) recently performed a technically advanced breast reconstruction procedure on a young female Veteran with breast cancer who had undergone bilateral mastectomies.

While the MEDVAMC has routinely offered breast reconstruction for post-mastectomy and post-lumpectomy patients for many years, a bilateral free, transverse rectus abdominis myocutaneous (TRAM) flap is a very complex reconstruction procedure involving advanced microsurgical techniques and skills.

"Our state-of-the-art surgical program, and this procedure in particular, clearly demonstrates the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center can and does provide the highest quality medical care to our female Veteran population," said Mimi Leong, M.D., M.S., F.A.C.S., Plastic Surgery Section staff surgeon.

The conventional TRAM flap is a tissue flap procedure that uses muscle, fat, and skin from the patient's abdomen to create a new breast mound after a mastectomy. Depending on the woman's particular body build, there may be enough tissue in this area to create a new breast. If not, there are other methods of reconstructing a patient's breast that involve either using other tissue flaps or using implants.

Photo by Bobbi Gruner, Public Affairs Officer

"Our state-of-the-art surgical program clearly demonstrates the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center can and does provide the highest quality medical care for our female Veteran population," said Mimi Leong, M.D., M.S., F.A.C.S., Plastic Surgery Section staff surgeon (right) with Gloria Caballero, L.V.N., Plastic Surgery scrub technician (left) and Deborah Larocca, R.N., C.N.O.R., Plastic Surgery Team leader.

"Studies suggest patients who have undergone breast reconstruction appear to have higher satisfaction rates than patients who do not," said Leong, who is also an assistant professor in the Division of Plastic Surgery at Baylor College of Medicine.

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Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic Scheduled to Reopen in March

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) plans to reopen a VA outpatient clinic in Texas City before March 30, 2011.

"Opening the Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic will bring medical care closer to where our Veterans live and greatly expand VA health care access south of Houston," said Adam C. Walmus, M.H.A., M.A., F.A.C.H.E., MEDVAMC director.

The approximately 10,000 sq. ft. clinic will be located at 9300 Emmett F. Lowry Expressway, Suite 206, Texas City, 77591 next to the Mall of the Mainland. It will occupy space in the Mainland Crossing Shopping Center next to Sam's Club, the University of Texas Medical Branch Family Healthcare Center, and other retail establishments.

"An outpatient clinic in Texas City is great news for Veterans living

(continued on page 4)

Homeless Vets Find Essential Services at Stand Down

Photo by Fron Burke, Public Affairs Specialist

HUD-VASH Housing Specialist Bernadette Triche discusses housing options with a Veteran. The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center is committed to ending the cycle of homelessness among Veterans. A new initiative toward this goal is the HUD-VASH Program; a collaborative partnership with the VA, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and community agencies.

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Program hosted the 10th Houston Area Stand Down for Homeless Veterans on October 21-22, 2010 at the Emancipation Park Community Center.

The event was held in cooperation with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, Houston Office of Veterans Affairs, B.P.O. Elks, Career and Recovery Resources, Inc., Coalition for the Homeless, Daughters of the American Revolution, Goodwill Industries of Houston, Harris County Hospital District, Harris County Veteran Services, Housing Corporation of Greater Houston, Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program, Salvation Army Harbor Light Center, SEARCH, Texas Veterans Commission, U.S. Veterans Initiative, the Houston VA Regional Office, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post #12024 of The Woodlands and the Ladies Auxiliary, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Motorcycle Group of Texas Unit 1-12024, and Houston-area Vet Centers.

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Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic Reopens March 2011

Call 409-761-3200 to transfer your health care.

VA Docs in Houston Help Veteran Grow a New Liver

HOUSTON – Cancer treatment experts at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) recently combined two unique procedures to successfully treat a 58-year-old Veteran suffering from life-threatening liver cancer.

A routine test performed by his health care provider at the VA Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi found Robert Coote, Jr. had a serious liver lesion. Doctors told him he only had six months to live, but also gave him hope by referring him to the Liver Tumor Program at the Houston VA.

"Mr. Coote was immediately examined by our multidisciplinary team of experienced and knowledgeable cancer care specialists," said Daniel A. Anaya, M.D., surgical oncologist, director of the DeBakey VA Liver Tumor Program, and an assistant professor of Surgery/Surgical Oncology at Baylor College of Medicine. "It was determined liver resection, the surgical removal of a portion of his liver, was the best treatment option. However, in order to be completely safe, he also needed to undergo a portal vein embolization."

The liver is a unique organ because it can re-grow after part of it has been removed. However, the body does require that a minimum amount of liver be left behind following surgery in order to give the body enough time for this re-growth to occur.

In some circumstances, the tumor in the liver is so large, that a large amount of liver would need to be removed so that all the disease can be taken out. In these circumstances, physicians utilize portal vein embolization to help the liver re-grow before the surgery. Patients who previously were not candidates for surgery, due to the small amount of liver that would be left behind, can now undergo surgery and have successful and safe removal of their tumor.

"During the procedure, a needle is placed through the skin into the blood vessel in liver that has the largest portion of the tumor," said Katsuhiro Kobayashi, M.D., staff interventional radiologist, who performed the portal vein embolization on the Army Veteran. "This blood vessel is then cut off, tricking the liver into making the other side grow."

Photo by Bobbi Gruner, Public Affairs Officer

The Virtual Tumor Board allows VA physicians throughout the South Central United States to tap into the specific and unique expertise of a team of cancer experts at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston. Daniel Anaya, M.D., surgical oncologist and director of the DeBakey VA Liver Tumor Program (right), and Katsuhiro Kobayashi, M.D., staff interventional radiologist, meet with Veteran Robert Coote, Jr. and his grandson during a follow-up appointment.

"This whole thing came out of left field and I was scared," said Coote. "When I told family that I was going to the VA for treatment, they asked if I had considered other choices. But I saw how careful and thorough the VA doctors were and I knew they would take good care of me."

After six weeks, Coote's liver was of sufficient size that surgery was deemed safe. Anaya and his team performed a right liver resection and the patient was discharged six days later.

"My care at the VA has been amazing," said Coote. "I now have very positive prognosis and look forward to taking my grandchildren fishing and seeing them grow up."

"The Liver Tumor Program at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center offers Veterans the latest medical and surgical treatments available for cancer," said David H. Berger, M.D., M.H.C.M., Operative Care Line executive and professor of Surgery at Baylor College of Medicine. "The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center constantly strives to open new doors and make new medical alternatives available for our Veterans."♦

A Word from the Director . . .

Get Involved with National Salute Week

Adam C. Walmus, MA, MHA, FACHE
Medical Center Director

HOUSTON - February 13 through 19, 2011 is a special time at Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers across the nation. Established as an official VA program in 1978, this week is known as National Salute to Veteran Patients and is an annual event designed to increase awareness of Veterans and the sacrifices they have made for our nation. It is an opportunity for the public to visit the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) and its outpatient clinics, meet America's Veterans, and explore the various aspects of our facility's volunteer program.

Columnist Ann Landers initiated a movement several years ago encouraging school children and adults alike to write a special note of thanks to hospitalized Veterans in a Valentine's Day greeting. We take great care in distributing these cards to Veterans and displaying them throughout our hospital during this particular week.

It is touching to see how much effort young children put into making special Valentines to brighten the lives of our nation's Veterans. Cards come in every shape and size - and are made with everything from tissue paper, stickers, and colored doilies to crayons, construction paper, and stamps. One thing all of these cards have in common is they are made with love and respect for our nation's Veterans.

In addition to cards from school children, hospitalized Veterans and those with outpatient clinic appointments receive visits and enjoy special programs provided by community and area Veteran Service Organizations, Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) and Junior ROTC members, elected officials, celebrities, and local personalities throughout the week. These visits have traditionally included personal time together sharing stories and interests, playing cards or board games, and distribution of U.S. flags.

National Salute also draws awareness to the role of the MEDVAMC in the community, as well as the many important volunteer opportunities at the facility.

I encourage you to send a Valentine to a Veteran or support one of the many special activities during this week at the MEDVAMC. I know you will enjoy the wonderful atmosphere created by staff and volunteers to honor our Nation's heroes. The cheer and well wishes spread to hospitalized Veterans is quite 'contagious' and is a 'prescription you can fill!'

Contact our Voluntary Service Office at (713) 794-7135 or *vhahouvolunteer@va.gov* for more information and how to get involved.♦

Live southwest of Houston and tired of driving into the city for VA Primary Care appointments?

Call today to transfer your care to the NEW Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic.

832-595-7700 or toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 12800
22001 Southwest Freeway, Richmond, Texas 77469

Houston VA's Polytrauma Program: Rebuilding Injured Lives

HOUSTON - Combat in Iraq and Afghanistan has demonstrated the nature of modern warfare has changed. There are new causes of injury, improvements in body armor, and surgical stabilization at the front-line of combat. More war-wounded are returning with complex, multiple injuries such as amputations, traumatic brain injuries, spinal cord injury, visual impairments, and psychological adjustment problems. Moreover, improvised explosive devices, blasts (high pressure waves), landmines, rocket-propelled grenades, and explosive fragments now account for the majority of combat injuries.

Blast-related injuries are often "polytraumatic," meaning they result in injury and/or impairment to more than one body system or organ, and often require specialized intensive rehabilitation processes and coordination of care across the full continuum.

Of these injured military personnel, about 60 percent have some degree of traumatic brain injury. The frequency and unique nature of these blast injuries create the need for a unique interdisciplinary polytrauma rehabilitation program to handle the ongoing rehabilitative, psychological, medical, and prosthetic needs of these individuals.

In 2005, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) added an extremely important program to its array of available health care services, a Network Polytrauma Program.

As part of the VA's Polytrauma System of Care, the program at the MEDVAMC provides both inpatient and outpatient services using an interdisciplinary team consisting of specialty physicians, rehabilitation therapists, neuropsychologists, speech pathologists, audiologists, prosthetists, blind rehabilitation specialists, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other disciplines, with access to the full range of medical and support services within the medical center.

Findings from initial patient assessments trigger appropriate treatments and/or referrals to other specialists in the areas of brain injury evaluation and treatment, amputation management and prosthetics, visual and hearing impairment, and treatment for post traumatic stress disorder.

The goals of the MEDVAMC Polytrauma Program are to provide post-acute medical assessment to patients injured by blasts or accidents; provide medical, rehabilitation, and psychological treatment services; coordinate care as patients move from acute hospitalization through rehabilitation and ultimately back to the home and community; provide case management and family support through all phases of treatment; monitor short and long-term outcomes for these individuals; and continue a program of research to better understand the effectiveness of treatments for traumatic brain injuries, spinal cord disabilities, and mental health problems.

The VA Polytrauma System coordinates the transfer and provision of health care for polytrauma patients within the VA and between VA and the Department of Defense to ensure timely access to Veteran health care benefits. In addition to rehabilitation services and psychosocial support for both patient and family, the VA offers education and training to prepare patients and families for success after going home.

Photo by Bobbi Gruner, Public Affairs Officer

Injured in April 2007 when an improvised explosive device detonated under an overpass in Iraq, Navy Corpsman Anthony Thompson sustained a severe head injury, an injury to his back, a punctured right lung, and other injuries. Recently transferred to the care of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical from the VA Medical Center in Tampa, Fl., Stephanie Sneed, M.D., Polytrauma/Traumatic Brain Injury Program director examines Thompson during a home visit.

"The Polytrauma Program reflects VA's commitment to care for the men and women who have served in uniform. A reality of combat is that some return with loss of limbs, traumatic brain injuries, and other severe injuries," said Stephanie Sneed, M.D., Polytrauma/Traumatic Brain Injury Program director. "The DeBakey VA recognizes it must provide specialized care for military service members and Veterans who sustained multiple and severe injuries."♦

Homeless Vets Find Essential Services at Stand Down

(continued from page 1)

"Stand Down" is a military term referring to the brief period of time a soldier leaves an active combat area in order to rest and regain strength. Stand Downs are one part of VA's efforts to provide services to homeless veterans.

"This year's Stand Down was a tremendous success," said Luis Paulino, HCHV Program director. A record number of 85 community agencies provided information and services to 802 male Veterans, 26 female Veterans, and 230 homeless non-Veterans.

Veterans enjoyed hot meals, clean clothes, health screenings, and 160 received flu vaccinations. VA and Social Security benefits counseling, legal aid, and referrals to a variety of other necessary services, such as housing, employment and substance abuse treatment were also available from community agencies such as Texas Veterans Commission, Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program, Goodwill Industries, the Internal Revenue Service, and American Red Cross.

The HCHV Program is committed to assisting homeless Veterans with chronic mental illnesses to reach their highest level of functioning. HCHV staff assists Veterans with securing safe housing reflective of their abilities and preferences, as well as assistance with obtaining skill development services.

About one-third of the adult homeless population has served their country in the Armed Services. Current population estimates suggest that about 107,000 Veterans (male and female) are homeless on any given night and perhaps twice as many experience homelessness at some point during the course of a year. Many other Veterans are considered near homeless or at risk because of their poverty, lack of support from family and friends, and dismal living conditions in cheap hotels or in overcrowded or substandard housing.

Right now, the number of homeless male and female Vietnam era Veterans is greater than the number of service persons who died during that war — and a small number of Desert Storm Veterans are also appearing in the homeless population.

Although many homeless Veterans served in combat in Vietnam and suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, at this time, epidemiologic studies do not suggest that there is a causal connection between military service, service in Vietnam, or exposure to combat and homelessness among Veterans. Family background, access to support from family and friends, and various personal characteristics (rather than military service) seem to be the stronger indicators of risk of homelessness.

Treatment goals for each Veteran through HCHV are individualized and may include meeting their immediate basic needs of food and protective housing; stabilization of mental health problems including substance abuse treatment and sobriety maintenance; individual and group psychotherapy; evaluation for financial disability benefits; vocational assessment; gainful employment; and schooling or a training program.

Houston is one of 30 communities where the VA takes its substance abuse services directly to the area's homeless. Under its HCHV Program, the MEDVAMC has an addiction therapist to work directly in homeless shelters, counseling Veterans with substance abuse problems.

"The dedication of our community partners and 100 volunteers added to the success of this year's Stand Down," said Jeri Gates, 2010 Stand Down coordinator. "Their commitment and support in assisting Veterans in need is immeasurable."♦ *Fran Burke, Public Affairs Specialist*

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Poor Judgment
Constant Stimulation
Aggressive Behavior

Bipolar Disorder Research Study

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The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and Baylor College of Medicine are enrolling in a nine-week research study for the treatment of late-life Bipolar Disorder or Manic-Depression.

You will be compensated for your time.

BCM
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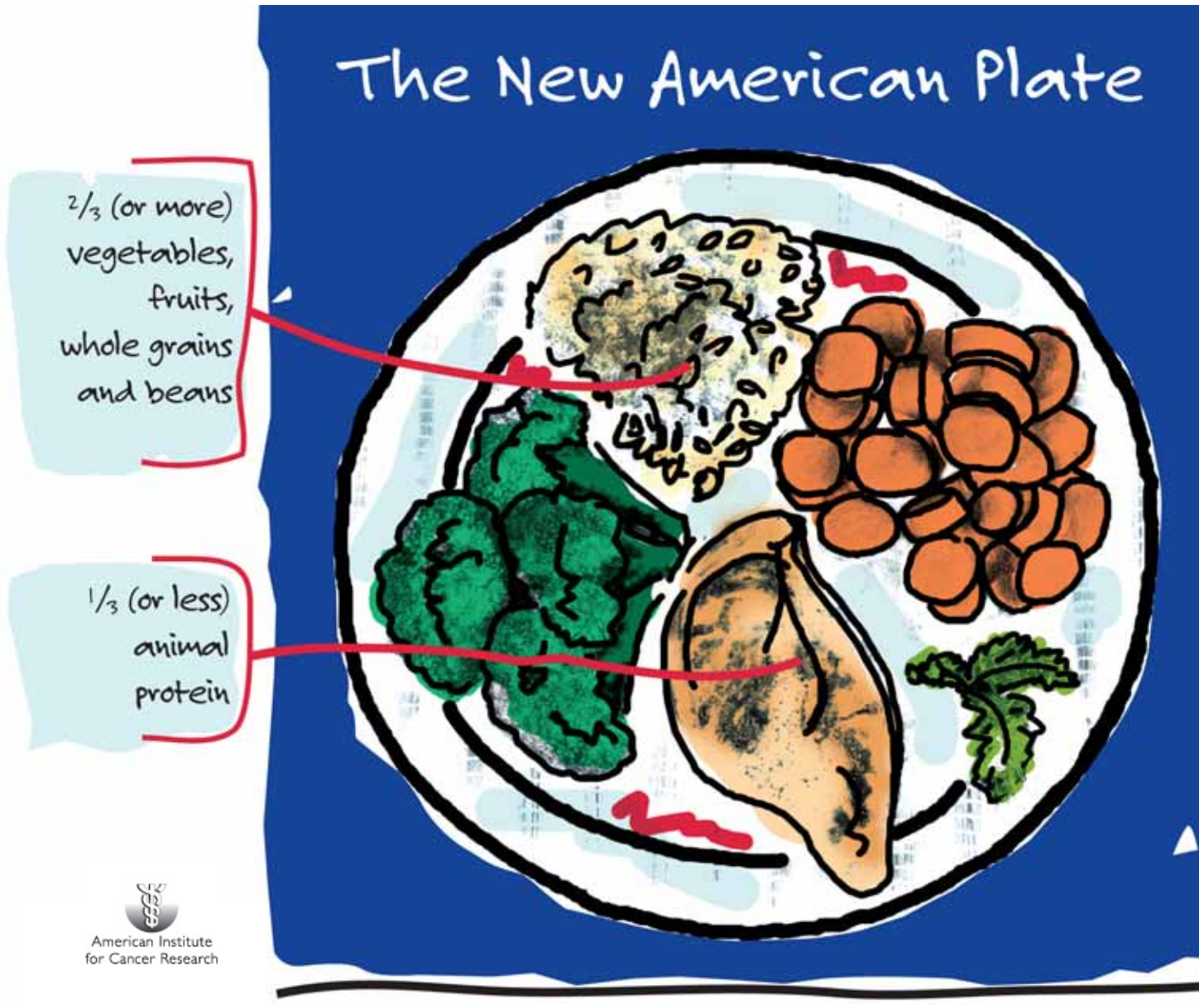
MICHAEL E. DeBAKEY VETERANS AFFAIRS MEDICAL CENTER

Please call to see if you qualify.
▸▸▸ 713-791-1414, ext. 6750

“New American Plate” Idea Helps You Eat Healthier



HOUSTON – What did your dinner plate look like last night or the night before? Was it heaping full of meatloaf and mashed potatoes? Was there any room for vegetables? Did you stop when you were full or keep eating because it tasted so good?

Now, these are questions we all could ask ourselves. The answers might help us realize that our eating habits could be improved.

Furthermore, this need for a change is clear as the rates of obesity continue to rise. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 68 percent of people in the United States are overweight or obese. Obesity is not the only problem; chronic disease such as diabetes is also on the rise. A shocking 26.8 million people in the United States are diagnosed with this disease.

However, the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) has developed an easy way to help people eat a more healthy diet and decrease their risk for cancer and other chronic diseases. It is called the “New American Plate.”

The main focus of the “New American Plate” is portions and proportions. This simply means that the amount of fruits and vegetables on your plate should be greater than the amount of meat, and portion sizes of all food should be watched.

Moreover, the goal is to aim for meals consisting of two-thirds (or more) vegetables, fruits, whole grains, or beans and one-third (or less) animal protein.

This new approach is not a diet, but rather a method to control weight, reduce risk of cancer, and live a healthier life. The AICR has found that eating a mostly plant-based diet, as recommended by the “New American Plate” guidelines, will decrease cancer risk and promote weight loss. Furthermore, maintaining a healthy weight is not only helpful to reduce your risk of cancer, but also to reduce the risk of other chronic disease.

Researchers estimate about one-third of the most common cancers could be prevented by eating a healthier diet, being physically active, and maintaining a healthy weight.

Adding more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to your diet may be a challenge at first, especially if you are not used to eating these types of foods. To make it easier, there are countless books and websites with tasty recipes and meal planning tips to help you meet these guidelines. The AICR has developed a cookbook and posted recipes on their website, *www.aicr.org*.

In addition, the Department of Agriculture has a “My Pyramid Tracker” at *www.mypyramidtracker.gov* to help track the calorie content of foods you are eating. This is an online dietary and physical activity assessment tool providing information on your diet quality, physical activity status, and related nutrition and physical activity facts.

Making small changes can equal big results that will improve your health and quality of life. ♦ *Dietetic Intern Caitlin Skuse*

Texas City Clinic to Reopen

(continued from page 1)

in, not only Galveston County, but also nearby Brazoria County,” said Frank Furleigh, Galveston County Veterans Service Officer. “It will dramatically cut the drive times Veterans face going to see a primary care provider in Houston and take some of the pressure off the Galveston VA Outpatient Clinic.”

The clinic, with 12 exam rooms, will be open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. The VA-staffed facility will provide primary health care, mental health care, and a women’s clinic in addition to laboratory, X-ray, telemedicine, teleretinal imaging, and audiology services. Emergency medication needs will be met on a local contract basis.

Veterans who wish to transfer their primary health care to the new Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic should call 409-761-3200 today.♦

What is Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)?

HOUSTON - Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) makes it hard for you to breathe. Coughing up mucus is often the first sign of COPD. Chronic bronchitis and emphysema are common COPDs.

Your airways branch out inside your lungs like an upside-down tree. At the end of each branch are small, balloon-like air sacs. In healthy people, both the airways and air sacs are springy and elastic. When you breathe in, each air sac fills with air like a small balloon. The balloon deflates when you exhale. In COPD, your airways and air sacs lose their shape and become floppy, like a stretched-out rubber band.

Cigarette smoking is the most common cause of COPD. Breathing in other kinds of irritants, like pollution, dust, or chemicals, may also cause or contribute to COPD. Quitting smoking is the best way to avoid developing COPD.

Treatment can make you more comfortable, but there is no cure. If you wish to quit smoking and need help, visit *www.publichealth.va.gov/smoking* or talk to your Prime Care Provider.

To help Veterans quit smoking and tobacco use, VA offers screening for tobacco use during primary care visits; individual counseling; prescriptions for nicotine replacement therapy, such as a nicotine patch or gum, or other medications; and participation in evidence-based smoking cessation programs.

Individuals living with COPD are encouraged to join the Better Breathers’ Club, which meets the last Wednesday of every month at 1:30 p.m. in the Home Oxygen Clinic, 3rd Floor, Room 3C-371. The group is supported by the American Lung Association of Texas and is designed to help people with lung disease and their families learn how to improve their activities in their daily life. ♦ *Courtesy National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute*

Don’t Be A No-Show.

A Veteran who does not show up for his or her VA medical appointment is a “No Show.” Please call the Appointment Center at **713-794-8985 or toll-free 1-800-639-5137** at least 24 hours before to cancel or reschedule your appointment so it may be used by another Veteran.

Turned Away by Two Houston Hospitals, VA Saves 42-Year Old Veteran's Life

HOUSTON – Army Veteran Thaddeus Collins had his first heart attack three months ago. At 42 years old, he underwent an emergency coronary catheterization, a minimally invasive procedure using a thin, flexible tube that accesses the heart, at a local Houston hospital. Tests showed he had severe coronary artery disease stopping blood and oxygen from getting to his heart and blocked carotid arteries stopping oxygen from getting to his brain. Cardiac surgical specialists told him he would never survive surgery and prescribed medication.

Two months later, he ran out of medication and went to another Houston hospital with symptoms of heart failure and chest pain. There, cardiac surgeons also turned him down for surgery because of the high risk for death and again treated him with medication.

"I was tired, depressed, and had just accepted I would not see my 8-month-old and 8-year-old daughters grow up," said Collins. "People told me I should go to the VA because they have the best cardiac department in Houston, so I thought, 'What do I have to lose?'"

"Mr. Collins came to our Emergency Room complaining of sharp chest pains," said Danny Chu, M.D., associate chief of Cardiothoracic Surgery at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC). "We repeated the coronary artery catheterization and found diffusely diseased small coronary targets along with severely depressed cardiac function."

Chu and his multidisciplinary team evaluated Collins for a possible coronary artery bypass surgery procedure. With coronary bypass surgery, surgeons use healthy blood vessels taken from the patient's arm, leg, chest, or abdomen and connect it to other arteries in the heart so blood can go around the diseased or blocked area.

"I had a lot of confidence in Dr. Chu and his team; otherwise, I would have walked right out the door," said Collins who served during the Gulf War. "He took the time and explained every test, procedure, and result so I could understand everything. He has a great deal of compassion; that also reassured me."

Veteran Now Has Bright Future with Two Young Children

"Mr. Collins was extremely high risk because of the poor condition of his heart. He was also at risk for a stroke due to his bilateral occluded carotid arteries," said Faisal Bakaeen, M.D., chief of Cardiothoracic Surgery at the MEDVAMC and an associate professor of surgery at Baylor College of Medicine (BCM).

Photo by Bobbi Gruner, Public Affairs Officer

Army Veteran Thaddeus Collins talks with Danny Chu, M.D., associate chief of Cardiothoracic Surgery during a follow-up appointment. The state-of-the-art infrastructure and team approach coupled with the surgical expertise at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center enables its staff to achieve good outcomes while performing high risk cases that other medical centers turn down.

Collins' only other possible surgical option was a heart transplant which has limited survival beyond 10 years plus life-long immunosuppressive therapy. The alternative, coronary artery bypass surgery, has a 10-year survival rate of more than 80 percent.

"It was difficult for me to put Mr. Collins on the waiting list for a heart transplant because he is so young and most patients die before a suitable heart becomes available," said Chu, who is also an assistant professor of surgery at BCM. "After much discussion with the patient, we performed successful quadruple coronary artery bypass surgery with the assistance of our team of surgical experts."

Collins recovered quickly from the procedure and was discharged seven days later without complications and free of all chest pain.

"I am so very glad the VA in Houston is here. I owe everything to Dr. Chu, Dr. Bakaeen, and all my doctors and nurses; they saved my life," said Collins. "Today, I am living my life and planning for a long future with my children."

"It is really the state-of-the-art infrastructure and team approach coupled with the surgical expertise at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center that allows us to perform such high risk cardiac cases," said David H. Berger, M.D., M.H.C.M., Operative Care Line executive at the MEDVAMC and a professor of surgery at BCM. "This unique environment enables us to achieve good outcomes while performing high risk cases that other medical centers turn down." ♦

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More Surgical Options for Female Veterans in Houston

(cntinued from page 1)

Leong is board certified in General Surgery and Plastic Surgery. She is also a member of the Wound Healing Society, the Plastic Surgery Research Council, the Association for Academic Surgery, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (Candidate), and the American College of Surgeons (Candidate). Her specialty is plastic surgery, with specific interests in aging and wound healing.

Free tissue transfer, such as the free TRAM flap, requires detaching the tissue from its original location and transplanting it to a different location and reconnecting its blood supply using complex microsurgical techniques. Unlike the conventional TRAM, the free TRAM flap allows the surgeon to recreate the breast mound using abdominal tissue while sparing the abdominal muscle.

Women make up one of the fastest-growing segments of the Veteran population. In Houston, about 11 percent of Veterans treated at the MEDVAMC are women.

In response to this growing need, the MEDVAMC recently opened a new Women's Health Center. With its own private entrance from outside the building, the new clinic is 2,800 sq. ft. with seven exam rooms as well as a larger waiting room to accommodate women in a comfortable, friendly atmosphere. This "One-Stop Shop" for women includes routine primary care, gynecological services, patient education, and preventive medicine.

Two years ago, the MEDVAMC initiated clinical use of a surgical robotic system to perform minimally invasive gynecological operations, including minimally invasive hysterectomies.

"The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center constantly strives to open new doors and make innovative surgical alternatives available for all of our Nation's heroes; male and female alike," said David H. Berger, M.D., M.H.C.M., Operative Care Line executive and professor of Surgery at Baylor College of Medicine. ♦

We're Surrounded by Fast Food, But Don't Surrender

HOUSTON - Fast food is the term given to food that can be prepared and served very quickly. The United States has the largest fast food industry in the world, and American fast food restaurants are located in more than 100 countries. Fast food makes it easy to get a quick meal. In addition, fast food meals are cheap and you can have it your way - small, medium, large, or supersize.

But, what is all that fast food doing to us as a nation? The movie industry had an answer to this question. "Super Size Me," a film directed by and starring Morgan Spurlock, documented his experiment to eat nothing but fast food for thirty days. His resulting health problems included weight gain, increased cholesterol, and other health issues.

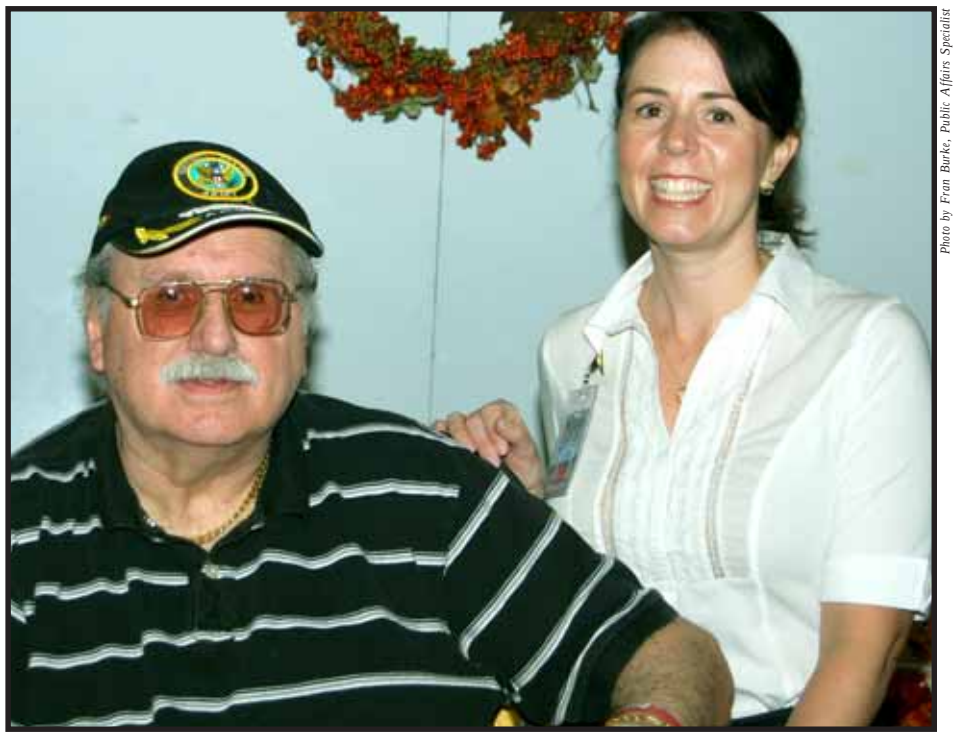

Photo by Fran Burke, Public Affairs Specialist

Dietetic Intern Meghan Peckis discusses the benefits of a good diet with Army Veteran Michael Bucciero. If you would like to talk with a registered dietitian about weight loss strategies, call 713-791-1414, ext. 4295.

In addition, fast food chains have come under fire from consumer groups over issues such as caloric content, trans fats, and portion sizes. Eric Schlosser's book "Fast Food Nation" provided Americans with a detailed look at the culture of fast food. His book illustrates the socioeconomic and obesity aspects of eating fast food.

Moreover, portion sizes have increased in restaurants as well as at home where our plates, bowls, and cups are bigger, making portion size control difficult. Furthermore, it is inexpensive for restaurants to add food to your plate, and they often do this to increase profits. People consume their entire meal at restaurants because of the "clean plate club" or frugality in these tough economic times.

Now, how do we eat a quick meal, but still eat a meal that is healthy and low in fat and cholesterol? You can pick healthier options at fast food establishments. Put up your defenses when you enter a restaurant. Consult fast food restaurant websites which can provide valuable information about ingredients, calories, and other nutrition information. Think about what you want to order before entering the restaurant so you will not be tempted into a last minute unhealthy substitute.

Here are some tips for making healthy choices at fast food restaurants. Instead of a jumbo cheeseburger, try grilled chicken, sliced meats, or even a regular hamburger on a bun with lettuce, tomato, and onion. Instead of fried chicken or taco, try grilled chicken or salad but watch out for high-fat dressings and ingredients such as croutons, cheese, and bacon. Instead of fried chicken pieces, try grilled chicken. Also, cancel the french fries and order a baked potato with vegetable or yogurt topping. Substitute pretzels for potato chips. Try water, small juice, 1 percent fat or fat-free milk, or a diet soft drink instead of a milkshake.

Skipping meals becomes a bad habit when your job requires you to spend most of your day on the road, meet deadlines, or wait for appointments. However, it is important to eat at least three meals a day to prevent overeating. Bring healthy snacks with you on the road to help stop those hunger pangs and overeating at your next meal. Fresh fruits and vegetables can be convenient foods for busy people – carrots, celery sticks, and unsweetened fruit cups are available in small, carry-along packages. Other healthy snack choices include fat-free crackers, rice cakes, bagels, bran muffins, pretzels, and unsalted nuts.

The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found more than two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese. The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) offers a weight loss program for Veterans called "Managing Obesity of Veterans Everywhere" (MOVE) that educates participants about nutrition, behavioral changes, and physical activity. MOVE's website, www.move.va.gov, offers tips for weight reduction and control. The MEDVAMC also offers classes to teach Veterans about specific health issues and to encourage eating healthy and being active and fit for life.

Eating a quick healthy meal low in fat and cholesterol cuts down your risk of heart disease; so, do not forget nutrition while you are on the run. To summarize, a quote from one of our Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin may have said it best - "I saw few die of hunger; of eating, a hundred thousand." ♦ *Dietetic Intern Meghan Peckis*

SUPPORT GROUP LISTING

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) "Starting from Scratch"
Meets every Tuesday and Thursday, 7 p.m., Room 6C-117; and every Wednesday, 7 p.m., Room 6C-105. Facilitator: Bo Cook, 713-791-1414, ext. 6987

Amputee Support Group
Meets 4th Wednesday every month, 3 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Dining Room. Facilitators: Betty Baer, 713-794-7793 & Stacy Flynn, 713-791-1414, ext. 4441

Better Breather's Club
Meets last Wednesday every month, 1:30 p.m., Room 3C-371, Home Oxygen Clinic. Facilitator: Paula Denman, 713-794-8979

Breast Cancer Support Group
Meets last Tuesday every month, noon, Education Conference Room 4A-380H. Facilitator: Magdalena S. Ramirez, 713-791-1414, ext. 5289

Cancer Support Group
Meets 3rd Tuesday every month, 1-2 p.m., Cancer Center Conference Room 4C-345. Facilitator: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, 713-791-1414, ext. 5273

FamilyCares Mental Health Group
Meets 1st Monday every month, 5:30 p.m., 6th Floor, Room 6B-110. Facilitator: Dionne Crump, 713-791-1414, ext. 6650

Fibromylgia Support Group
Contact facilitator for information: Gabriel Tan, 713-794-8794

Hepatitis C Support Group
Meets 1st Friday every month, 1:30 p.m., Primecare Clinic 5. Facilitators: Edith Yeldell, 713-791-1414, ext. 3613 & Jodi M. Francis, ext. 3394

HIV Support/Educational Group
Meets every Tuesday, 2 p.m., Clinic 4, Room 1A-442. Facilitator: Patricia Suarez, 713-791-1414, ext. 6177

Liver Transplant Support Group
Meets every Tuesday 3 p.m., Room 5B-166, Facilitator: Juleena Masters, 713-791-1414, ext. 6286

Lung Cancer Support Group
Meets 1st Tuesday every month, 1:30 p.m., Cancer Center Family Room 4C-365. Facilitator: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, 713-791-1414, ext. 5273

Heart Disease Support Group
Meets 3rd Thursday every month, 11 a.m., Nursing Unit 2A Dining Room. Facilitator: Rosa Lane-Smith, 713-791-1414, ext. 4034

Pain Coping Skills Training Group
Meets every Tuesday, 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Facilitator: Gabriel Tan, 713-794-8794

Pain Education Group
Meets every Wednesday, 2 p.m., Room 5C-215. Facilitator: Gabriel Tan, 713-794-8794

Pain Support Group
Meets every Wednesday, 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, 713-794-8794

Parkinson's Disease Education & Support Group
Contact facilitator for more information: Naomi Nelson, 713-794-8938

Prostate Cancer Support Group
Meets 3rd Thursday every month, 1-2 p.m., Cancer Center Conference Room 4C-345. Facilitator: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, 713-791-1414, ext. 5273

Stroke Support Group
Meets 3rd Tuesday every month, 3 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Day Room. Facilitators: Kathryn Kertz, 713-791-1414, ext. 4192, Laura Lawhon, 713-794-7816

Vet-to-Vet Support & Education Group
Meets every Wednesday, 6 p.m., Room 6B-117; every Thursday, 9 a.m., 6B-117; and every Thursday, 11 a.m., Room 6C-167. Veteran facilitator. info: Cristy Gamez-Galka, 713-791-1414, ext. 4378

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Study Shows Teamwork and Training Decrease Surgery Mortality Rate

Photo by Shawn James, Media Section

Researchers found hospitals that had undergone the VA's Medical Team Training decreased their mortality rate by 18 percent, while those that had not, decreased by only seven percent. Above, David H. Berger, M.D., M.H.C.M., Operative Care Line executive (left) at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center prepares for surgery with an anesthesia resident and operating room nurse, Grace Campos, RN (right).

HOUSTON – While medical teams and hospital staff do their best to prevent death related to surgery, it still occurs. Many institutions have implemented programs to decrease that number, but there is not enough data to fully explain the effectiveness.

A consortium of researchers from the National Center for Patient Safety, Dartmouth Medical School, the University of Texas Medical Branch Galveston, Baylor College of Medicine, and the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston focused on the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Medical Team Training Program and found that through implementation, the death rate decreased by 18 percent.

"This is the first study to demonstrate a decline in surgical mortality through the use of this particular training program," said David H. Berger, M.D., M.H.C.M., Operative Care Line executive and co-author of the retrospective study which appears in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

The training program, which was first implemented at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, includes two months of preparation and training, a one-day conference, and one year of quarterly coaching interviews.

Some of the important aspects of the training program include creating a pre- and post-operative checklist which includes formal briefings and debriefings before and after surgeries. Another important factor in training is instruction in teamwork and communication which includes identifying and challenging others when safety risks are known, recognizing "red flags," stepping back to reassess a situation and clinicians effectively during patient care transitions.

This was followed by four quarterly follow-up structured interviews for one year to support, coach, and assess the program.

"What is important about this study is there is a similar group that can be used as a control. We can look not only at the statistics from those hospitals involved in the training program, but we can also compare them to a similar group that has not yet gone through the training," said Berger, who is also professor and vice chair of the department of surgery at Baylor College of Medicine.

Results showed an overall decrease in the mortality rate related to surgery among all facilities. However, those that had undergone the training program decreased the mortality rate by 18 percent, while those that had not, decreased the mortality rate by seven percent.

"This program includes not just the surgeons, but also the operating room nurses and even administrative support staff," said Berger. "The care of each patient involves the entire team."

The nationwide program was put into effect in 2006 after three years of pilot programs. Within the VHA, there are 153 hospitals. Surgeries are performed at 130, but only 74 hospitals had implemented the training program when the current study began.

Others contributing researchers include Julia Neily, Priscilla West, Drs. Peter D. Mills, Yinong Young-Xu, Brian T. Carney, Lisa Mazzia, Douglas E. Paull, and James P. Bagian, all with the VHA National Center for Patient Safety in Washington, D.C. Drs. Mills and Young-Xu are also with the Department of Psychiatry, Dartmouth Medical School in New Hampshire. Dr. Bagian is also with the University of Texas Medical Branch Galveston and the F. Edward Hebert School of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland.

Funding for this study came from the VHA National Center for Patient Safety and the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. ♦

Expert's Corner

Curtis Bergeron is the My HealtheVet Program Coordinator at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. The HealtheVet Program offers Veterans, active duty soldiers, their dependents, and caregivers anywhere, anytime Internet access to VA health care information and services. My HealtheVet is a free, online Personal Health Record that empowers Veterans to become informed partners in their health care. With My HealtheVet, America's Veterans can access trusted, secure, and current health and benefits information as well as record and store important health and military history information at their convenience.

www.myhealthevet.va.gov

1 Why Use My HealtheVet - Veterans who register gain access to all of the tools on My HealtheVet. These tools can help you monitor your health care through online prescription refill, a blended view of VA prescriptions, and self-entered medications and supplements, personal health journals, and, in the near future, online copies of selected portions of your VistA electronic medical record. We are continually developing new features to help you.

2 Improve Yourself - The Department of Veterans Affairs offers Veterans, active duty Service members, their dependents and caregivers the gift of My HealtheVet, www.myhealth.va.gov, VA's award-winning online Personal Health Record. Access is easy and convenient anywhere the Internet is available. With My HealtheVet, users access trusted and secure VA health information to better manage their health care and facts about other VA benefits and services. My HealtheVet helps Veterans partner with their health care teams and provides them opportunities and tools to make informed decisions.

3 Improve Your Access - If you are already a My HealtheVet user and a VA patient, get an upgraded account. An upgraded account allows Veterans enrolled at a VA health care facility access to advanced features of My HealtheVet and links their Personal Health Record with information from their VA electronic health record. To access advanced features, Veterans must complete a one-time process called In-Person Authentication or "IPA." This includes making a visit to their VA facility to verify their identity in person. After completing the IPA, VA patients can use My HealtheVet to (1) Refill their VA prescriptions by name, not just by the prescription number; (2) Access a blended view of their VA and non-VA medications; (3) Receive VA Wellness Reminders; and (4) Access new features as they become available.

4 Improve Your Online Activity with VA - Soon, VA patients who have completed the IPA process will be able to view their VA appointments, VA lab test results, and VA list of allergies. They also may communicate electronically with their health care teams through "Secure Messaging" as this feature becomes available this spring at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center.

5 Using MyHealtheVet is Free - Registering and using My HealtheVet is easy and it is free! To complete your in-person authentication in Houston, contact MyHealtheVet Coordinator Curtis Bergeron or ask for any Administrative Assistant. In the Outpatient Clinics, ask for the Administrative Assistant. For more information, call 713-791-1414, ext. 6348 or e-mail vhahoumyhealthevet@va.gov today!

Veterans' Questions

Answers provided by Patient Advocates in Consumer Affairs Room BA-200 (Basement) (713) 794-7884 or e-mail vhahougeneralquestions@va.gov

Question: My father served during World War II. Is he eligible for nursing home care?
Answer: Any Veteran who has a service-connected disability rated at 70 percent or more qualifies for nursing home care. Veterans whose service-connected disability is clinically determined to require nursing home care also qualify. Care will be provided in a VA nursing home or contract nursing home.

Question: I am having some problems coping since I got back from Iraq, but I don't want to go to the hospital. Is there other help?
Answer: The Houston Vet Centers provide readjustment counseling and outreach services to all Veterans, who served in any combat zone, in consumer-friendly facilities apart from traditional VA medical centers. Services are also available for family members for military related issues. In Houston, Vet Centers are located at 701 N. Post Oak Road, tel: 713-682-2288; 2990 Richmond Avenue, Suite 225, tel: 713-523-0884; and 14300 Cornerstone Village Dr., Suite 110, tel: 713-578-4002.

Question: Does the VA have a nursing hotline?
Answer: The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center operates the VA Network Telecare Center Hotline at 713-794-8985 or toll-free 1-800-639-5137. Registered nurses, social workers, and mental health professionals are ready to provide emergency counseling assistance, make appointments, and answer veteran health care questions 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Question: Are Veterans of the Coast Guard eligible for healthcare?
Answer: Individuals who served in the Coast Guard are Veterans and are eligible for VA health care benefits in the same manner as any other Veteran who served in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, or Air Force.

Question: When should I reorder my prescription refills?
Answer: To receive your medications on time, you must order your refills at least 14 days before your medicine runs out. To ensure timely delivery of your medications, it is recommended you order your refills as soon as you receive your medication in the mail so the next refill will be shipped to you before you are scheduled to run out of your medication.

Question: How do I get more news and information about the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and Veterans' health care?
Answer: Send an e-mail to *bobbi.gruner@med.va.gov* to sign up to receive news releases and information. You can also visit *www.houston.va.gov* and click on the "News & Media Center" button.

Question: I couldn't find a parking space on the Houston VA campus and was late for my appointment. What is being done to fix this problem?
Answer: Parking on VA grounds is restricted to employees, patients, and their family members or visitors. All others will be ticketed or towed. If you see someone you believe should not be parking on the VA campus, please take the license number and notify the VA Police at 713-794-7106 immediately.

Free valet parking is available at the main entrance for Veterans. This service operates Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except for federal holidays. A "No Tipping" sign is posted at the main entrance and this policy is strictly enforced.

Question: Is it okay to ask my doctor or nurse to wash their hands?
Answer: Yes, make sure health care providers clean their hands or wear gloves. Doctors, nurses, dentists, and other health care providers come into contact with lots of bacteria and viruses. So, before they treat you, ask them if they have cleaned their hands. Health care providers should wear clean gloves when they perform tasks such as taking throat cultures, taking blood, touching wounds or body fluids, and examining any part of your body.

Question: I want to get more information about Agent Orange.
Answer: For information about special issues such as Gulf War, Agent Orange, Project Shad, Mustard Agents and Lewisite, and Ionizing Radiation, call the VA at 1-800-749-8387.

Question: My disabilities are not related to my service. Are there any benefits for which I might qualify?
Answer: VA pension is a benefit paid to wartime Veterans with limited income, and who are permanently and totally disabled or age 65 or older. You may be eligible if you were discharged from service under other than dishonorable conditions, served 90 days or more of active duty with at least one day during a period of war time, have family income is below a yearly limit set by law, and are permanently and totally disabled or age 65 or older.

However, anyone who enlists after September 7, 1980, generally must have served at least 24 months or the full period for which called or ordered to active duty. For all current information about compensation and pension, eligibility, payment rates, or applications, go to *www.vba.va.gov/VBA/*.

Question: I received a call asking me for a personal credit card number to pay for my prescriptions in advance. Has VA changed their policy?
Answer: No. VA has not changed its processes for dispensing prescription medications. If you have received a call asking for personal financial information, please let us know by calling 713-383-2791. The VA will never call and ask you to disclose personal financial information over the phone.

Important VA Telephone Numbers

Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center 713-791-1414
toll-free 1-800-553-2278
VA Network Telecare Center 713-794-8985
toll-free 1-800-639-5137
Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic 409-981-8550
toll-free 1-800-833-7734
Conroe VA Outpatient Clinic 936-522-4000
toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 1949
Galveston VA Outpatient Clinic 409-761-3200
toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 12600
Lufkin - Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic 936-671-4300
toll-free 1-800-209-3120
Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic 832-595-7700
toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 12800
Pharmacy Refills 713-794-7648
toll-free 1-800-454-1062 or www.myhealth.va.gov
Pharmacy Helpline 713-794-7653
Suicide Prevention Hotline ..... toll-free 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
Appointment Center ..... toll-free 1-800-639-5137
Automated Appointment Information 713-794-7648
toll-free 1-800-454-1062
VA Eligibility & Enrollment 713-794-7288
Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program 713-794-7848
Homeless Veterans Drop-In Center (1418 Preston St.) 713-794-7533
Hotline for Homeless Veterans ..... toll-free 1-877-4AID VET

Operations Enduring Freedom & Iraqi Freedom Support Team
Team Members 713-794-7034/8825/7928

Vet Center (701 N. Post Oak Road) 713-682-2288
Vet Center (2990 Richmond Ave.) 713-523-0884
Vet Center (14300 Cornerstone Village Dr.) 713-578-4002

Patient Advocates
Houston 713-794-7884
Beaumont ..... 1-800-833-7734, ext. 113
Conroe ..... 936-522-4010, ext. 1952
Galveston ..... 713-791-1414, ext. 6586
Lufkin 936-671-4362
Richmond 832-595-7700

Houston VA National Cemetery 281-447-8686
Houston VA Regional Office 713-383-1999
toll-free 1-800-827-1000

National Salute to Veteran Patients

February 13-19, 2011

National Salute to Veteran Patients is a great opportunity for community members and organizations to visit the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, meet America's Veterans, and explore various aspects of the facility's volunteer program.

Don't forget to send your Valentine's Day cards and letters to Veteran inpatients by mailing them to MEDVAMC, Mailcode: 580/00X, 2002 Holcombe Blvd., Houston, TX 77030. For more information, call 713-794-7135.