



Too Risky for Surgery and Running Out of Time, Docs Offer New, Life-Saving Technology as Alternative

HOUSTON – The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) is the first VA to implant an innovative artificial heart valve recently approved for commercial use by the Food and Drug Administration.

The Sapien heart valve made by Edwards Lifesciences is implanted through a catheter as an alternative to open heart surgery for patients with inoperable aortic valve stenosis disease. Army Veteran Cottrell McGowan, 81, of Nacogdoches, Tx. received this transcatheter aortic valve on December 21, 2011.

“In addition to his advanced age, Mr. McGowan had chronic lung and renal disease, and a heavily calcified aorta so he was not a candidate for open surgery,” said Biswajit Kar, M.D., F.A.C.C., Interventional Cardiology director and an associate professor of Medicine-Cardiology at Baylor College of Medicine (BCM). “We were able to offer him this life-saving device and he was ready to go home two days later.”

Aortic valve stenosis is an age-related disease caused by calcium deposits in the valve that cause it to narrow and stiffen. As it becomes harder to pump the blood out to the rest of the body, the heart weakens. Patients experience fainting, chest pain, heart failure, irregular heart rhythms, and cardiac arrest. Without treatment, symptomatic patients usually die within two years. It affects approximately 300,000 Americans.

Many older or sicker patients suffering from aortic valve stenosis are considered poor candidates for conventional surgery, which requires cutting open the chest and temporarily stopping the heart.

“With the aging population, the potential impact of this procedure is enormous,” said Faisal Bakaeen, M.D., chief of Cardiothoracic Surgery and associate professor of Surgery at BCM. “People can literally gain a new lease on life overnight.”

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Photo by Bobby Gramer, Communications Director

“This amazing surgery was a great Christmas present,” said Army Veteran Cottrell McGowan with Cardiothoracic Physician Assistant J. Antonio Delgado, M.P.A.S., P.A.-C. and Surgical Intensive Care Staff Nurse Candyce Zacharie, R.N., B.S.N. “Because of the doctors and nurses at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, I’m fortunate to be able to spend it and many more with my family.”

Wheelchair-Bound Veteran on Road to Walking



Photo by Quentin Adams, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF) Intern

Army Veteran David Pruitt goes through a physical therapy session at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center with Student Physical Therapist Caitlin Regan.

HOUSTON - Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) Physical Therapist Sheryl Vandeven listened intently as Army Veteran David Pruitt told her about the day he had surgery and realized he “could not feel anything in his lower legs.”

Pruitt talked with Vandeven in the MEDVAMC Physical Therapy Room where he was in the ninth month of an astonishing recovery from a horrific back injury. The journey had taken him from a wheelchair to walking on his own two feet. Pruitt’s recovery was possible because of special electrical stimulation devices, excellent VA physical therapy staff, and plenty of hard work and determination.

Pruitt’s journey to the DeBakey VA started several years ago and more than 7,000 miles away when he was serving his country in the Middle East.

“He was hit in the head with something heavy,” said Vandeven, who has been with the VA for 12 years. “He also suffered extensive back injuries which required multiple complicated surgeries, and was left with some spinal cord damage.”

Initially, Pruitt sought help at a VA medical center in Arkansas. When he moved to Houston to be closer to his

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Houston VA on Facebook and Twitter

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Using Air to Blast Away Surgical Site Infection

HOUSTON – As a result of a \$1.2 million award from the National Institutes of Health, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) is initiating a pilot study of a novel device to determine its ability to reduce bacterial contamination and decrease the incidence of surgical site infection after surgical procedures requiring insertion of prostheses.

“This randomized, controlled clinical trial will investigate the incidence of surgical site infection occurring after hip arthroplasty, vertebral fusion, and femoral-popliteal grafting procedures performed over a two-year period,” said Rabih O. Darouiche, M.D., VA Distinguished Service Professor in the departments of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Medicine, and Surgery and the study’s principal investigator.

Surgical site infections are a serious postoperative complication affecting almost 500,000 patients annually. In particular, infections occurring after surgical implementations of prostheses cause severe illness and the cost of treatment can reach \$100,000 per incidence.

Most infections occurring after surgical implantation of prostheses are caused by microorganisms that become attached to the implants at the time of surgery. Research published in peer-reviewed journals indicate that a

common source of these bacteria are skin cells shed by operating room personnel into the airborne environment that settle onto the surgical field.

“The Air Barrier System (ABS) is intended to shield surgical sites from airborne contaminants in the operating room by creating a localized ‘cocoon’ of ultraclean air surrounding incisions. This prevents the intrusion of airborne contaminants by sweeping them away,” said Darouiche, who is also the founder and director of the Center for Prostheses Infection at Baylor College of Medicine. “The ABS is currently approved by the Food and Drug Administration for use in hip surgery and does not interfere with the procedure.”

During a Phase I Clinical Study published in the *Journal of Arthroplasty*, the ABS reduced the presence of bacteria at incision sites during hip arthroplasty by 84 percent as compared to the ambient air present in surgical theatres.

The goals of this clinical trial are to determine the effectiveness of the ABS at reducing bacterial contamination of surgical incisions and detect trends in the rates of surgical site infection between the experimental group that uses the ABS versus the control group that does not.

Veterans undergoing orthopedic, neurosurgical or vascular surgical procedures that entail implantation of



“One goal of this clinical trial is to determine the effectiveness of this new technology at reducing bacterial contamination of surgical incisions,” said Rabih O. Darouiche, M.D., VA Distinguished Service Professor in the departments of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Medicine, and Surgery and the study’s principal investigator.

prostheses will be eligible for study enrollment.

“Should the study yield promising results, the research conducted at Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center could

lead to a breakthrough in addressing infection prevention in the operating room environment,” said Darouiche. ♦
Quentin Melson, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF Intern)

A Word from the Director . . .

New Veterans Advisory Council Working with Primary Care

HOUSTON - Following the lead of our namesake, Dr. DeBakey, and his pursuit of excellence and patient-centered care, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) recently created a new Veteran Advisory Council, consisting of Veterans and family members recruited through Voluntary Services.

The main goal of this Council is to improve communication between Veterans, their family members, the staff of our Primary Care Clinics, and senior management of our hospital.

The group will meet regularly to discuss issues affecting our Veteran population and act as consultants in formulating solutions to problems and unresolved needs.

The staff of each Primary Care Clinic will have specific members of the Veteran Advisory Council working with them to ensure our Veterans’ needs are met and their voices heard.

An important and exciting aspect of the Veteran Advisory Council is that the members will interact with the Veterans we serve, obtain opinions about the services we provide, and provide valuable and much needed



*Adam C. Walms, MA, MHA, FACHE
 Medical Center Director*

feedback to our staff members.

If you would like more information about this Council, contact Performance Improvement Coordinator Cheryl Hicks at 713-794-8285.

The MEDVAMC remains committed to providing you the best health care anywhere. Your opinion does count; and, we will continue to use your comments to improve the quality of health care and customer service available here, at your VA medical center.

If you receive a SHEP or Press Ganey Survey in the mail, you can also use these methods to tell us how we can better serve you. Thank you for your service and sacrifices for our country! ♦

Feeling Stretched and Stressed as a Caregiver?

HOUSTON - *Powerful Tools for Caregivers* is a free educational series designed to provide you with the tools you need to take care of yourself.

Research studies find high rates of depression and anxiety among caregivers and increased vulnerability to health problems. Caregivers frequently cite restriction of personal activities and social life as problems. They often feel they have no control over events, and that feeling of powerlessness has a significant negative impact on caregivers’ physical and emotional health.

Powerful Tools for Caregivers, developed by Legacy Caregiver Services, was developed over three years of pilot testing, refinement, and evaluative research to assess the program’s effectiveness. Since its inception, *Powerful Tools for Caregivers* has reached more than 60,000 caregivers.

This program helps family caregivers reduce stress, improve self-confidence, communicate feelings better, balance their lives, increase their ability to make tough decisions, and locate helpful resources.

Classes consist of six sessions held once a week and are open to caregivers

of Veterans of all eras. Experienced class leaders conduct the series (many are experienced caregivers themselves, who have successfully applied the techniques they teach). Interactive lessons, discussions, and brainstorming will help you take the “tools” you choose and put them into action for your life.

Classes are free and held Tuesdays from April 3 to May 8, 6 – 8 p.m.; Thursdays, June 7 to July 12, 6 – 8 p.m.; Tuesdays, August 14 to September 18, 10 a.m. – noon; and Thursdays, October 4 to November 8, 10 a.m. – noon at the Sheltering Arms located at 3838 Aberdeen Way in Houston.

You may register online at www.shelteringarms.org/caregivers/CaregiversHome.php or by calling 713-685-6544. If you register by phone, please identify yourself as a caregiver for a Veteran or a Veteran who is providing care to someone else. Class size is limited so call today.

For more information contact Tommie Espinosa, L.C.S.W., VA Caregiver Support coordinator at 713-791-1414, ext. 5047 or email Espinosa.Tomasita@va.gov. ♦

Research studies find increased vulnerability to health problems among caregivers.



Photo by Agapito Sanchez, Jr., Baylor College of Medicine

Research Coordinator Matthew Estey prepares Army Veteran Aaron Smelley for a functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging scan in order to learn how deployment affects the brain and to improve treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Returning Veterans Needed for PTSD Study: New PTSD Medical Technique

HOUSTON - Many Veterans return to civilian life having experienced traumatic events. Researchers recently discovered these experiences actually produce changes in the brain. A new medical study currently being conducted at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC), in cooperation with Baylor College of Medicine, uses functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to learn how deployment affects the brain and to improve treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

fMRI is a technique for measuring brain activity. It works by detecting changes in blood oxygenation and flow that occur in response to neural activity. When a brain is more active, it consumes more oxygen. To meet this increased demand, blood flow increases to the active area. fMRI can be used to produce activation maps showing which parts of the brain are involved in a particular mental process. This is a relatively new medical technique.

"There is limited information regarding the brain-related changes during psychotherapy," said Matthew Estey, a research coordinator for MEDVAMC. "We are interested in learning how psychotherapy changes neural functioning in Veterans with PTSD and anxiety disorders."

"Ultimately, we hope what we learn in our study will assist future combat Veterans who may experience PTSD and anxiety symptoms due to combat trauma," said Wright Williams, Ph.D., the principal investigator and a psychologist. The study is funded by a pilot merit review grant sponsored by the VA

Rehabilitation Research and Development Program.

As part of the research, eligible Veterans will use various computer applications while inside the fMRI machine. Participating Veterans will also participate in interviews regarding their past and present difficulties. They will be compensated for their time at a rate of \$10 per hour for interviews and \$20 per hour for fMRI scans. Participants will also receive a free high-resolution image of their brain. For Veterans who decide to enroll in the study, the entire process takes approximately 14 weeks.

"Week one includes an interview and fMRI scan," said Estey. "Weeks two through 13 involve an hour and a half group treatment meeting. Week 14 is another interview and fMRI scan. The study includes male and female treatment groups, and will potentially run through the beginning of 2013."

Eligible Veterans should be between 18 and 65 years old, free from current serious medical conditions, free of metal in their bodies, not claustrophobic, able to see a computer screen clearly with or without glasses, and diagnosed with PTSD. All participating Veterans receive on-going assessments by MEDVAMC mental health professionals.

"Unlike most medical studies, this one involves treatment specifically for Veterans," said Estey. "I think providing the best possible care for our nation's Veterans is extremely important."

For more information about the study or how to enroll, call 713-794-7629. ♦ *Quentin Melson, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF Intern)*

On the Road to Walking

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family, his doctors referred him to the DeBakey VA for treatment. It was there, that the Houston native first came into contact with the MEDVAMC Physical Therapy Team.

The team includes Physical Therapists Mathai George, Conrad Clemente, and Ryan Ardoin along with specialists in Kinesiology, Occupational Therapy, and Vocational Therapy.

"When he arrived here, he was unable to walk," said Vandeven. "He was wheelchair-bound and his back injuries left him unable to recognize where his legs were. His injuries occurred in the posterior part of his spinal cord which tells you where you are in space. He had a really hard time walking because he couldn't feel his legs."

"My right leg would start jerking and did not know where it wanted to go because I couldn't place it down myself," said Pruitt. "I was confined to a wheelchair and I couldn't stand up long enough to really walk."

"He had to think very hard with every step," said Vandeven. "To even walk a short distance, it was obviously mentally and physically exhausting. The first thing we did here was develop a goal-orientated plan for him."

At MEDVAMC, physical therapy is goal-based. Patients begin physical therapy only after a set of goals for the patient has been mapped out. Pruitt worked with Vandeven to develop his therapy goals.

"The first thing we wanted to do was get him out of the wheelchair," said Vandeven. "To accomplish this, we started by attaching a set of 'e stims' to both of his legs."

'E Stims' (functional electric stimulation units) are medical devices that allow individuals with brain or spinal cord dysfunction to walk with increased speed and balance, and regain freedom and independence. The device applies low-level electrical stimulation to

targeted areas to activate the nerves which control the muscles to lift the foot.

"The 'e stims' worked with David by stimulating the nerves in both of his lower legs," said Vandeven. "The devices stimulated the nerves just below his knees that make the ankle bend upward and a little outward, so that his toes don't drag when walking."

"The units were particularly helpful to David because although he is strong, he can't tell what position he is in," said Vandeven. "The electro-stimulation units make it easier for him to feel where he is in space."

While the electrical stimulation units are expensive, they are an important part of what makes the MEDVAMC Physical Therapy Program one of the best in the Nation.

"Thank goodness we have them," said Vandeven. "The benefits of having the device are tremendous. If you can move someone out of a wheelchair and get them moving around independently; then, not only are you improving the patient's quality of life but, also decreasing the serious complications from constantly being seated. This includes back pain, weight gain, and muscle atrophy."

Pruitt's goals included progressing from using a rolling walker to a four-point cane to getting by with only a single-point cane.

"By putting my mind to the recovery process and making goals, I have been able to make an amazing recovery," said Pruitt. "The goals were simple goals; but, just having reachable goals that I could accomplish with hard work has been very helpful. So far, I have achieved every goal except for one: unassisted walking. I think I will do that very soon."

Pruitt's physical therapist also believes this goal is within reach.

"We are working toward normal, comfortable, and confident walking," said Vandeven. "David is well on his way." ♦ *Quentin Melson, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF Intern)*



MICHAEL E. DEBAKEY
VETERANS AFFAIRS
MEDICAL CENTER



MAYO CLINIC



Baylor College of Medicine

Do you have stomach problems?

Many people have stomach discomfort, pain, or feel full after eating and have other problems with meals. For some people, the usual treatments do not help. VA researchers are conducting a research study of the effects of two FDA-approved medications to treat stomach symptoms that are related to eating.

You may be eligible to participate if:

- You are 18 to 75 years of age, and
- You experience stomach discomfort or pain for longer than 6 months, and
- You do not have diabetes and are not using antidepressants.

Compensation will be offered to participants. For more information, contact **Kristina Carter** at 713-794-8818 or kristina.carter@va.gov.

More information can be found at:

<http://clinicaltrials.mayo.edu> (keyword: dyspepsia)
<http://clinicaltrials.gov> (identifier: NCT00248651)

Volunteer!

Houston is First VA to Implant New Artificial Heart Valve

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The valve, made of bovine tissue and stainless steel, is about the width of a pencil when it is deployed through a catheter in the femoral artery in the groin. Once it arrives at the correct spot, the valve is released, replacing the diseased one. Patients generally stay in the hospital for an average of three days, compared to seven days with open heart surgery, Kar said.

"Surgeons and cardiologists are part of a whole team unified for this one disease process," Bakaeen said. "There is very little tissue trauma and in experienced hands, it can take approximately 60 minutes."

Besides Kar and Bakaeen, the MEDVAMC Heart Valve Team is a multidisciplinary team that includes cardiothoracic surgeons, cardiologists, vascular surgeons, anesthesiologists, radiologists, nursing and auxiliary staff superbly trained to take care of this unique and complex patient population.

"It was immediately apparent this VA medical center had the teamwork to make this program work and be successful," said Blase A. Carabello, M.D., Medical Care Line executive and vice chair of the Department of Medicine at BCM. "Everyone from nurses and rehabilitation specialists to imaging technicians and housekeepers focuses on the health and well-being of the patient."

"This new technology could add years to the lives of our patients," said David H. Berger, M.D., M.H.C.M., Operative Care Line executive at the MEDVAMC and professor of Surgery at BCM. "We are proud the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center has some of the best doctors and nurses in the country and offers the latest, minimally invasive alternatives for our Veterans." ♦

Strategy Enables Returning Vets to Engage with VA Medical Center

Houston VA Launches Facebook Page to Improve Communication with Vets

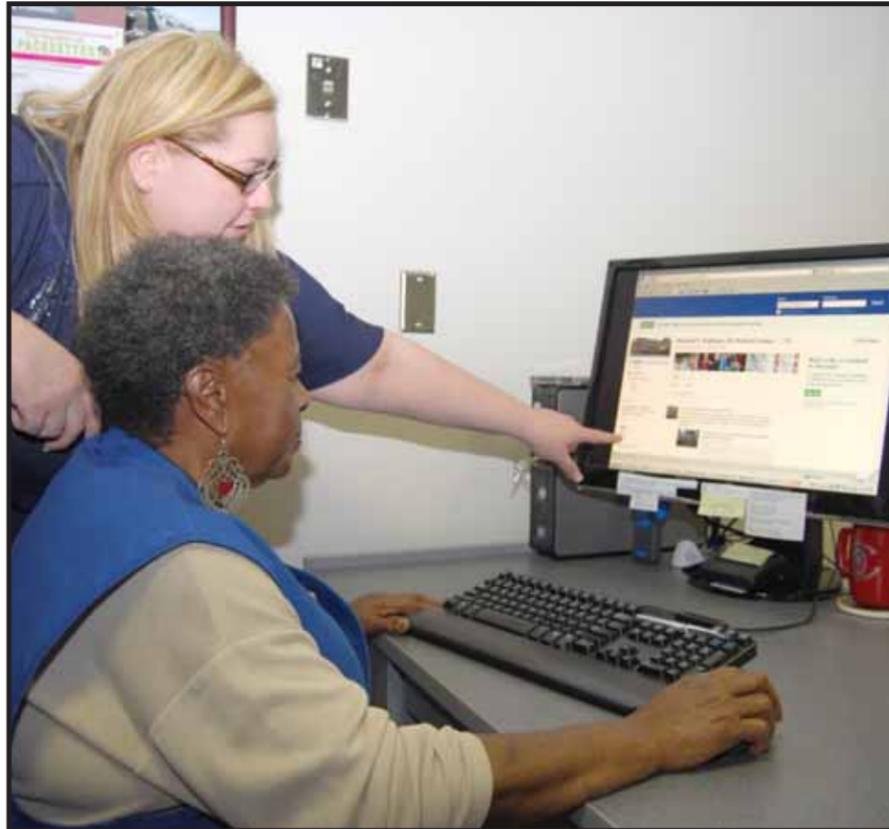


Photo by Bobbi Gruner, Communications Director

Social Media Specialist Nikki Verbeck shows Volunteer Johnnie Brown the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center's new Facebook page. "With more troops returning home, VA has a responsibility to connect with the thousands of Servicemembers who have been - and will be - entering the VA health care system. They're using social media, so that's where we need to be. Facebook helps us do that," said Verbeck.

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center recently launched its own page on Facebook, the world's largest social networking site.

"This is an important milestone in our effort to transform how we communicate with Veterans," said Adam C. Walmus, M.H.A., M.A., F.A.C.H.E., Medical Center director. "Millions of Veterans and their family members use social media each day; so, we are continuously searching for new ways to provide information to them, expand access, and embrace two-way conversation."

Houston is just one of more than 150 VA Facebook pages. Additionally, in June 2011, VA produced a

Department-wide social media policy that provides guidelines for communicating with Veterans online. The overarching strategy is designed to help break down long-perceived barriers between the Department and its stakeholders.

Veterans are encouraged to use Houston VA's new Facebook to offer feedback about VA health care programs and services, ask general questions about the facility and navigating the VA system, as well as request information about events or news.

Using Facebook, instead of the telephone, can eliminate frustration with voice mail and make getting answers to questions easier and faster.

"Veterans of all eras are depending on us to get the right information to the right person at the right time," said Nikki Verbeck, social media specialist. "With more troops returning home, we also have a responsibility to connect with the thousands of Servicemembers who have been—and will be—entering our system. They're using social media, so that's where we need to be. Facebook helps us do that."

VA Facebook sites are not appropriate for posting personal identifiable information, personal health information, specific health questions, or appointment information. Veterans can communicate directly with their health care providers using a new, secure, online tool called "Secure Messaging" available through the VA's MyHealthVet website at www.myhealth.va.gov.

Any comments containing vulgar language, personal attacks, or offensive comments that target or disparage any individual or group will be removed. Spam and remarks that are clearly off topic, advocate illegal activity, promote particular services, products, or political organizations, or infringe on copyrights or trademarks will also be deleted.

While VA clinicians will not discuss the specific health concerns of individual Veterans on Facebook, that does not prevent staff from monitoring VA's sites closely each day—and providing helpful information to Veterans when they can.

In the last year, for example, VA's Crisis Line counselors have successfully intervened on Facebook in cases where Veterans have suggested suicidal thoughts or presented with other emotional crises.

The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center currently has about 360 Facebook fans, but hopefully word-of-mouth and publicity will quickly increase this number. The facility also recently created a Twitter account, www.twitter.com/vahouston.

To "like" the DeBakey VA's Facebook page, visit www.facebook.com/HoustonVAMC. ♦ Bobbi Gruner, Communications Director

April 2nd Brings Major Change to Outpatient Pharmacy

HOUSTON - The Outpatient Pharmacy at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center fills almost 2,000 prescriptions at its window every day. Many of these are for routine refills and non-urgent medications;

consequently, creating long wait times for Veterans who have critical medication needs, are being discharged from the hospital, or were seen in the emergency room.

To help solve this problem and to avoid running out of medicine, Veterans are urged to order their next refill as soon as they receive a delivery. There are several easy and quick ways to refill prescriptions.

Internet (Fast & Easy) - Use VA's My HealthVet website at www.myhealth.va.gov. It is fast, easy, convenient, and secure. You can also use this website to send a secure email to your VA health care provider. You just need to upgrade by completing an In-

Person Authentication process when visiting your VA Primary Care Clinic. This ensures all personal information remains secure over the Internet.

Automated Telephone Refill Hotline (Fast & Easy) - The Automated Prescription Refill Hotline is available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. The telephone number is 713-794-7648 or toll-free 1-800-454-1062. The prescription number is located on the top left corner of a prescription container.

Mail - Mail the computerized refill form that came with the prescription. This method takes longer because of postal delivery processing times.

In an effort to reduce unacceptable,

long waits for urgent medication needs, the Outpatient Pharmacy will not accept routine refill requests or fill new, non-emergency medications at its window beginning April 2, 2012. Refills and non-urgent medications will be mailed to Veterans.

The Outpatient Pharmacy will make exceptions for emergency situations such as lost or stolen medications, or if a Veteran has run out of critical medications such as insulin or blood pressure medications.

To obtain a new prescription, Veterans must talk with their health care providers or contact the 24-hour VA Telecare Center at 713-794-8985 or toll-free 1-800-639-5137. ♦

Houston VA Selected as Women's Health Research Site

HOUSTON – The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center was recently selected as a Women's Health Practice-Based Research Network Member Site by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"We believe our participation in the VA Women's Health Practice-Based Research Network will result in improved health and health care for our women Veterans," said Rola El-Serag, M.D., Women's Health Center medical director. "This population needs more recognition and attention; women now comprise more than 13 percent of the total U.S. Armed Forces."

The Women's Health Research Network, composed of Consortium and Practice-Based Research Network (PBRN) components, focuses on VA investigators with demonstrated interests in women's health research and investigators interested in adding women to their research.

Through the Consortium, VA develops education and training sessions in key content and methodological areas, provides technical consultations, enhances communication networks, develops a mentoring program, and fosters effective dissemination. Through the

PBRN, VA has developed an infrastructure across partnered VA facilities to facilitate multi-site research.

"I am very pleased Dr. El-Serag's tremendous efforts toward providing the best care anywhere to women Veterans have been recognized by this designation," said Adam C. Walmus, M.H.A., M.A., F.A.C.H.E., Medical Center Director. "Her leadership role and the great women's health program we have here in Houston will be an important resource for researchers across the VA health care system."

El-Serag received her medical degree from Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston and is also an assistant professor of Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine.

Women are the fastest growing group within the Veteran population. VA Women Veterans Health Care addresses the health care needs of women Veterans and works to ensure that timely, equitable, high-quality, comprehensive health care services are provided in a sensitive and safe environment at VA health facilities nationwide. VA strives to be a national leader in the provision of health care for women, thereby raising the standard of care for all women.

*Women now
comprise more than
13% of the total
U.S. Armed Forces.*



Photo by Quentin Melon, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF Intern)

"We believe our participation in the VA Women's Health Practice-Based Research Network will result in improved health and health care for our women Veterans," said Rola El-Serag, M.D., Women's Health Center medical director.

To fulfill this critical mission, Women Veterans Health Care works to ensure that all eligible women Veterans requesting VA medical care services receive comprehensive primary health care from a proficient and interested primary care provider; privacy, safety,

dignity, and sensitivity to gender-specific needs; the right care in the right place and time; state-of-the-art health care equipment and technology; and high-quality preventive and clinical care, equal to that provided to their male counterparts. ♦

Spread the Word: VHA Healthy Diet Helps You Eat Better



Photo by Quentin Melon, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF Intern)

Dietetic Intern Marcie Perez discusses the benefits of a healthy diet with Army Veteran Kenneth Davenport. If you want to learn more about eating better, call 713-791-1414, ext. 4295.

HOUSTON - In 2009, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) treated more than four million Veterans with heart problems, diabetes, and high blood pressure. These diseases are some of the leading causes of death in America. However, eating better can help keep you healthy and fight illness.

This is the reason VHA has made healthy eating a top priority.

The new VHA Healthy Diet Food Model is designed to support sound nutritional practices and reduce the risks of chronic disease in our Veterans, their

family members, volunteers, as well as the VA staff.

Since the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC) has implemented this model, you may have noticed changes in the hospital food service and the Canteen.

Some of these healthy changes include meals with more fresh fruits and vegetables, more fiber, and less salt and fat. Also, portion sizes have been scaled down to accommodate our Veterans' needs, but not exceed their needs.

Therefore, our food provides healthier fats as well as fewer fats that are thought to cause heart problems.

Fish, a source of low-fat high quality protein, is also being served more times each week. Meat and meat substitutes that are lower in cholesterol are also being served. However, do not worry because dessert is still making an appearance on your tray once each day. Our cooks are also creating healthy variations on your favorite foods to adapt them to the new guidelines.

In the Canteen, low-calorie and low-fat foods have been labeled to encourage our Veterans to make healthier food choices. Plus, food items with more fiber are being sold, and there are more fruit and vegetable choices available. Even calorie counts and

nutrition facts have been posted to make your food decisions easier.

In addition, MEDVAMC Food Service has gone "Green!" As a result, we are producing less trash with more of our materials recycled. Moreover, we are cutting down on products that are harmful to our planet.

The VHA policy is to ensure our Veterans have access to the best medical care possible. The VHA Healthy Diet Model is another step to achieve that goal for our Veterans.

Finally, at the MEDVAMC, we remain committed to continually improve our programs and services in order to honor our commitment to our Veterans. For more information about the VHA Healthy Diet, contact 713-794-7120. ♦ *Marcie Perez, MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern*

*More than 4 million
Veterans were treated
for heart problems,
diabetes, and
high blood pressure*



**Don't Be
A No-Show.**

Make sure the clinic clerk has your most up-to-date contact information when you check-in or call the Appointment Center at **713-794-8985 or 1-800-639-5137.**

VA estimates approximately 22,000 Veterans live in Ft. Bend County.

Richmond Clinic is Ft. Bend's Best Kept Secret ... Unfortunately

RICHMOND, TX – The Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic is making a difference in the lives of Veterans in the Ft. Bend area, but not as many as the staff would like. In fact, the clinic only sees about 170 patients a week.

Activated on May 14, 2010, the clinic is staffed to see twice that many. The nearly 10,000 square-foot facility provides primary health care, mental health care, audiology, laboratory, and X-ray services. Emergency medication needs are met on a local contract basis.

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates there are approximately 22,000 Veterans living in Ft. Bend County.

Patient feedback about the Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic has been very positive and the staff has received high marks on patient satisfaction surveys.

"I am very happy with the exceptional group of professionals at the Richmond Clinic. Every person I had direct contact with displayed the very best of qualities," said one Veteran. "They were all courteous, friendly, and genuinely concerned about my health needs. I have found a home here and thank you for your excellent choice of health providers."

A satellite of Houston's Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC), the Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic is located at 22001 Southwest Freeway, Suite 200. This is

the professional building near OakBend Medical Center, close to U.S. Route 59.

Veterans may determine their eligibility for benefits and enroll for VA health care at the clinic, online by visiting www.1010ez.med.va.gov, or by calling toll-free 1-877-222-VETS (8387), Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. – 7 p.m.

"My doctor at the Richmond Clinic is the best I have ever had," said another Veteran. "The man who assisted me with my registration was also extremely helpful and considerate."

Health care at the clinic is provided by an engaged, collaborative team that supports learning, discovery, and continuous improvement with a focus on providing the highest quality health care possible to Veterans. In conversations with members of the clinic's health care team, the value of teamwork is a major theme.

"I like knowing that I can rely on the members of the staff to help our Veterans and each other," said Nurse Manager Aixa Lebron-Marquez, B.S.N., R.N., C.R.R.N. "Since we all have different experiences in health care, we use each other as resources. We have six LVNs [Licensed Vocational Nurses], an audiologist, two registered nurses, two physicians, a physician assistant, a social worker, a clinical pharmacist, a full-time psychiatrist, and great support staff. We are very proud of the services we offer



Nurses Missy Watson, L.V.N. (left) and Alethia Gallien, L.V.N. greet Veterans as they enter the Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic. The clinic is open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. For more information about the Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic or to make an appointment, call 832-595-7700 or toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 12800.

for our Nation's heroes."

Except for federal holidays, the clinic is open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. For more information

about the Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic or to make an appointment, call 832-595-7700 or toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 12800. ♦

Veterans are never alone . . . Support Groups are Available

Amputee Support Group

Meets 4th Wednesday every month, 3 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Dining Room. Facilitators: Stacy Flynn, 713-794-7819 & Rosa Lane-Smith, 713-791-1414, ext. 4034

Breast Cancer Survivors' Support Group

Meets last Tuesday every month, noon, Cancer Center Family Room 4C-365. Facilitators: Magdalena S. Ramirez, 713-791-1414, ext. 5289 & Gail Menchaca, 713-791-1414, ext. 3936

Cancer Support Group

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

Depression & Bipolar Support Group for Veterans

Meets every Wednesday, 7 p.m., Homeless Domiciliary, 7329 Fannin Street, Facilitator: Anthony Morris, 713-791-1414, ext. 2323

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

MOVE! Weight Management Support Group

Meets 1st and 3rd Friday every month, 9 a.m., Room 4C-122. Facilitator: Alicia Merritt, 713-791-1414, ext. 6166/3976

Parkinson's Disease Education & Support Group

Contact facilitator for more information: Shawna Johnson, 713-794-8410

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, Room 2B-210. Facilitators: Kathryn Kertz, 713-791-1414, ext. 4192 & Laura Lawhon, 713-794-7814

Vet-to-Vet Support & Education Group

Meets every Wednesday, 6 p.m., Room 6B-118; 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

Talk to the Social Worker in Your Clinic or on Your Unit for more information.

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www.houston.va.gov
www.facebook.com/HoustonVAMC
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Food: Fact versus Fiction

HOUSTON - When the subject of food comes up, we are usually overwhelmed because of the different opinions and options concerning what food we should or should not eat.

Consequently, keeping up with food trends can be extremely difficult. So, what is really fact or fiction when it comes to eating healthy?

Myth 1. “I am diabetic so I should not eat anything white.”

Truth: Avoiding an entire group of food is never a good idea. A person may feel they are being cheated and eat more than they normally would at the next meal.

Diabetics should monitor the amount of carbohydrates they consume; but, they should not completely avoid them. Other names for carbohydrates are “carbs” or “starches.”

White foods such as potatoes, rice, bread, and sugar do contain carbohydrates. However, many foods that are not white such as corn, peas, brown rice, fruit juice, and soda also contain carbohydrates.

For example, a cup of orange juice would elevate your blood sugar as much as a piece of white bread. Therefore, “white” foods can fit into a diabetic diet as easily as other foods.

Eating healthy is all about balance which includes a proper diet adjusted to your body needs and activity level.

Myth 2. “Artificial sweeteners are bad for me.”

Truth: Artificial sweeteners are also called sugar substitutes (SS). Examples of sugar substitutes are Sweet ‘N Low, Equal, Splenda, and Truvia. They are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The FDA must approve foods as safe before they can be sold.

However, SS have a bad reputation as something that can cause cancer. Current research has found no clear link between their use and the risk of cancer in humans.

Myth 3. “Sea salt is better than table salt.”

Truth: Sea salt has the same amount of sodium (salt) as table salt. If you are looking for a salt substitute, try herbs or salt-free seasonings. Also, check the ingredient list on foods you purchase to make sure the food is truly salt-free.

Myth 4. “Eggs are bad for me”

Truth: Eggs have a bad reputation because the yolks are high in cholesterol. Nevertheless, eggs are good to eat in modest amounts of three or four a week. Also, eggs are a great source of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin D, and Vitamin B₁₂.

Furthermore, if your cholesterol is high try eating just the egg whites or low-cholesterol eggs.



Photo by Bobbi Gramer, Communications Director

Current research has found no clear link between artificial sweeteners and the risk of cancer in humans. Marine Veteran Martin Rodriguez has found eating healthy is all about balance which includes a proper diet adjusted to individual body needs and activity level. If you want to learn more about eating better, call 713-791-1414, ext. 4295.

Myth 5. “Eating before bedtime makes me gain weight.”

Truth: The food you eat before bedtime will not make you gain any more weight than food you eat during the day.

Weight gain occurs when you consume more calories than you burn with exercise or physical activity. So, if you exercised enough in the day to burn off the calories in the late night snack, you will not gain weight. One thing to consider is that late night snacking occurs because you are bored.

Thus, if you are snacking out of boredom, not hunger, those late-night calories probably will catch up with you which will result in weight gain.

Trying to figure out what is fact or what is fiction when it comes to healthy eating can be difficult. If you need more information, visit www.eatright.org or if you have questions, contact a VA Registered Dietitian at (713) 791-1414 ext. 3976, 4296, or 6166. ♦ Alyssa Anderson, MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern

Spring into Healthy Living: Moderation is The Key



Photo by Fran Burke, Public Affairs Specialist

Michael Ringenberg who is a Vietnam Veteran as well as a participant in the Managing Overweight and/or Obesity for Veterans Everywhere (MOVE) Program decided he wanted to be healthier, reduce his medications, and live longer. He started losing weight by waving his arms up and down in front of the TV. He lost 38 pounds, and now can walk four miles.

HOUSTON - Moderation is a way of life emphasizing perfect amounts of everything, and not indulging in too much of one thing.

The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Program strives to help Veterans connect with healthy living programs and services with moderation being the key.

Eat Wisely, Focus on Nutrition

Eat a variety of foods to include all food groups in moderation to maximize your health. Keep starch portions to

about the size of a tennis ball (use an ice-cream scooper to measure rice, hot cereal, pasta, potatoes, beans, and corn). Also, choose bread with at least two grams of fiber per serving and cereals with at least four grams of fiber per serving. Include three cups of dairy or dairy equivalent (e.g. soy milk) each day.

With spring in the air, choose fruits and vegetables, either fresh or frozen, in many different colors. Try to make half of your plate non-starchy vegetables.

Limit Alcohol

Drinking alcohol can be enjoyable

and social for many individuals. If you choose to drink, drink in moderation. For women, this is one drink each day and for men this is two drinks each day.

Do you binge drink? Binge drinking for women or individuals over 65 years old is three drinks on one occasion. For men, it is drinking more than four drinks on one occasion. One standard drink always contains the same amount of alcohol regardless of serving size or the type of alcoholic beverage. Therefore, stop to think because a drink is a drink is a drink.

Control Your Weight

Recently, Michael Ringenberg who is a Vietnam Veteran as well as a participant in the Managing Overweight and/or Obesity for Veterans Everywhere (MOVE) Program told his support group: “Just do something! Your doctor’s not going to do it for you. Your husband or wife is not going to do it for you. Your kids might ask you to change, but they’re not going to do it for you. You have to make up your mind to change for yourself. Just do something!”

Ringenberg decided he wanted to be healthier, reduce his medications, and live longer. He started losing weight by waving his arms up and down in front of the TV. He lost 38 pounds, and now can walk four miles.

Maintain a Healthy Weight, Eat Wisely, and Be Physically Active

The MOVE Program at the MEDVAMC allows the Veteran to participate in personal goal setting.

Any Veteran receiving care at the VA who wants assistance in managing their weight can participate.

Veterans individually tailor the program to meet their specific goals through a comprehensive and multi-disciplinary approach using behavioral changes, nutrition, and physical activity.

This program teaches Veterans how to become healthier by emphasizing moderation, health, and well-being as achievable goals. Some ways to help you achieve your goals are listed below:

1. Choose an area you want to improve in your life.
2. Write down two reasons why it is important to change. Rate them on a scale of 0 - 10.
3. Rate your confidence in changing from 0 - 10.
4. Why is your confidence not lower? Why is it not higher? Review old achievements or barriers.
5. Write down one measurable goal you want to achieve over the next month. If you achieve your goal, reward yourself with a non-food reward, such as going to the movies, getting a new shirt, or getting a pedicure.

“Let’s Move” and spring into healthy living and moderation! For more information, visit www.move.va.gov or call the Prime Care Nutrition Clinic at 713-791-1414, ext. 6166/4295/3976.

At the VA Outpatient Clinics, talk to your primary health care provider. ♦ Anne Utech, MS, RD, LD, Health Promotion & Disease Prevention Program Manager

Veterans' Questions

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

vhahougeneralquestions@va.gov

Q: Question: Is there one Web site that contains all kinds of benefit information for Veterans?

A: Yes, the National Resource Directory is a comprehensive, free, online tool for wounded, ill, and injured service members, Veterans, and their families. Visitors to the site can find an extensive range of information about Veterans' benefits, including disability and pension benefits, VA health care, and educational opportunities. The site also provides

information for those who care for Veterans, such as access to emotional, financial, and community assistance.

A recent addition to the Web site is a specialized section where users can find help for homeless Veterans. The new design will help visitors find needed resources easily. Other enhancements include a fast, accurate search engine; a "bookmark and share" capability that allows users to share valuable resources on Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites; and a news feature with updates on relevant information and events. Resources are added daily: www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov.

Q: Is there a way to screen myself for mental health issues without anyone knowing?

A: The stress of overseas deployment and combat can be a breeding ground for mental health problems, but a negative stigma often keeps military men and women from getting professional help. Troops can seek help anonymously at www.militarymentalhealth.org. This website allows members of the military and their spouses to screen themselves for mental illness - everything from post traumatic stress syndrome to bipolar disorder.

Q: Does VA offer creative arts events or sports clinic for Veterans?

A: Yes. Find out about the Creative Arts Festival, the Golden Age Games, the Training-Exposure-Experience Tournament, the Summer Sports Clinic, the Wheelchair Games, the Winter Sports Clinic, and more great events for Veterans at www.va.gov/adaptivesports.

Disabled Veterans and disabled members of the Armed Forces who want to take their skiing skills to the next level are eligible to apply for the VA Paralympic ski clinic at Arapahoe Basin resort, April 22-27. For more information, contact Kevin Jardine, U.S. Paralympics, at 719-332-8640 or kevin.jardine@usoc.org

Q: Does the VA offer weight loss programs just for Women Veterans?

A: Yes. Join the free, new MOVE! Weight Management Group specifically designed for Women Veterans meet their unique goals in weight loss.

Run by MOVE! Registered Dietitians and supported by motivated participants, you can take advantage of eight free sessions targeting intuitive eating, food, and exercise tracking, cooking and grocery shopping, and making healthier changes to last a lifetime.

The sessions are offered on select Fridays at 1 p.m. at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Room 4C-122.

For more information and to schedule an appointment, call 713-791-1414, ext. 6166/3976.

Q: How do I get more news about the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and Veterans' health care?

A: Send an e-mail to bobbi.gruner@va.gov

to sign up to receive news releases and information. You can also visit www.houston.va.gov and click on the "News Center" symbol.

Q: What is the latest update on the new clinics in Katy and Tomball? How about a larger clinic for Conroe?

A: The Katy and Tomball VA Outpatient Clinics will each be approximately 30,000 sq. feet and are on target to open in late 2012. These VA-staffed facilities will provide primary health care, mental health care, and women's specialty care in addition to laboratory, X-ray, telemedicine, teleretinal imaging, pharmacy, optometry, and audiology services.

The Conroe VA Outpatient Clinic has been approved for expansion from its current 10,000 sq. feet to 30,000 sq. feet with anticipated completion in fiscal year 2014.

Q: Is there any way to email my health care provider a medical question?

A: Yes. The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center has implemented Secure Messaging for patients to communicate with their health care providers through email. Secure Messaging minimizes telephone tag and saves time.

To take advantage of Secure Messaging, Veterans must register at www.myhealth.va.gov and begin the In-Person Authentication (IPA) process. This ensures all personal information remains secure over the Internet. To complete the IPA process, Veterans may visit their Primary Care Clinic, the Release of Information Office at MEDVAMC, or any VA outpatient clinic.

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
Lake Jackson VA Outpatient Clinic	979-230-4852
Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic	832-595-7700 toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 12800
Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic	409-986-2900 toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 12900
Pharmacy Refills	713-794-7648 toll-free 1-800-454-1062 or www.myhealth.va.gov
Pharmacy Helpline	713-794-7653
Veterans Crisis Line	toll-free 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
Caregiver Support Hotline	toll-free 1-855-260-3274
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

Assistance for Returning Troops from Iraq/Afghanistan

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

Vet Center (990 IH 10 North, Ste. 180, Beaumont) ... 409-981-8576

Patient Advocates

Houston/Lake Jackson 713-794-7884

Beaumont 1-800-833-7734, ext. 113

Conroe 936-522-4010, ext. 1952

Galveston/Texas City 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