

Houston VA Commended During IG Visit

HOUSTON, TX - The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) recently conducted a Combined Assessment Program (CAP) review of the Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC). The purpose was to evaluate selected operations, focusing on quality of care and management controls.

CAP reviews are part of the OIG's effort to ensure that high quality health care and benefits services are provided to our Nation's veterans. CAP review teams perform independent and objective evaluations of key facility programs, activities, and controls.

The team evaluates how well the facility is accomplishing its mission of providing quality care and improving access to care, with high patient satisfaction; reviews selected financial and administrative activities to ensure that management controls are effective; and conducts fraud and integrity awareness briefings to improve employee awareness of fraudulent activities that can occur in VA programs.

In addition, a CAP review may examine issues or allegations that have been referred by facility employees, patients, members of Congress, or others.

Review of the HVAMC affirmed that this medical center provides high quality health care to veterans. Also significant are the high levels of patient and employee satisfaction that were noted by the CAP review team. Patient care, quality management, financial, and administrative controls were found to be generally operating satisfactorily. The review team noted a few opportunities for improvement such as the reduction of excess medical, prosthetic, and engineering supply inventories and strengthening of inventory management controls.

In a congratulatory letter to HVAMC Director Edgar L. Tucker, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi said, "Please accept my sincerest congratulations on the IG's comments on your recent CAP preparation. I was very impressed with the audit manager's appraisal of a high level of professionalism at all levels throughout the VA Medical Center." ■

Houston VA Medical Center Offers New Patient Orientation Clinic

HOUSTON, TX - "At times, the VA can be a jigsaw puzzle of a polar bear in a snowstorm, and I'm trying to put the pieces together. I think the information I learned from this class will help me make sense of things," said a veteran who recently attended the Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC) New Patient Orientation Clinic.

At nearly three million square feet, six stories, four exterior sections, and four atriums, the HVAMC is an impressive and intimidating structure for any visitor. Add to that, the sometimes, confusing array of VA medical benefits and services, any veteran could understandably become frustrated.

HVAMC management realized the severity of situation after examining veteran satisfaction scores and veterans' comments and complaints. A committee was quickly formed to find answers to the problem.

The solution? Start-up of a new two-hour training class with topics ranging from HVAMC Prime Care services, co-payment and insurance information, inpatient care services, and social work programs to prescriptions and refills, the 24-hour, seven-day a week nursing telephone triage line called VA Network Telecare, and the Patient Education Resource Center.

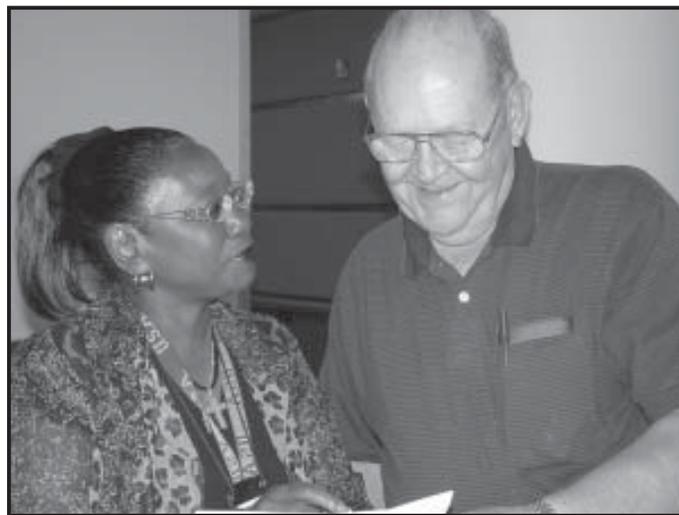


Photo by Bobbi D. Cooney, HVAMC Public Affairs Officer

At a recent New Patient Orientation Clinic, veteran Felix Sivcoski asks staff member Melody Miles a question about his appointment letter. This new two-hour training class covers topics ranging from HVAMC Prime Care services and co-payment and insurance information to prescriptions and refills, and the nursing telephone triage line called VA Network Telecare.

With the first class on July 9, 2003, the HVAMC New Patient Orientation Clinic is held twice monthly from 8 a.m. to 9:50 a.m. in the HVAMC 4th Floor Auditorium. While most attendees receive

an "invitation" in the mail, walk-ins are also welcome to attend.

So far, each class averages just over

(continued on page 4)

Houston area would get seven more VA outpatient clinics . . .

VA Proposes Changes for Texas Health Care Facilities

WASHINGTON - The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has released details about a proposal for realignment of its nationwide health care facilities, including Texas.

"The draft National CARES plan, which is being released for public comment, will enable VA to provide more care, to more veterans, in places veterans need it the most," said VA's Under Secretary for Health Dr. Robert H. Roswell in August.

Roswell emphasized that the latest developments are only proposals and no final decisions have been made. The plan now goes to the national CARES Commission. During the next three months, the commission will hold public reviews and hearings.

Veterans and other stakeholders will have ample opportunity to comment on the proposals, which will be published

in their entirety on VA's Web site at <http://www.va.gov/CARES>.

CARES, short for "Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services," is a landmark study of VA's health care infrastructure. Among the elements of the draft National CARES plan are expansion of outpatient primary and specialty care, realignment of facilities that are in close proximity and proposals to reduce unused or underused space. The result of CARES will be more health care for more veterans, closer to where they live. Under CARES, 48 new community clinics and two new hospitals would be constructed and many VA medical facilities would be expanded.

In Texas, where 407,000 of the state's 1.7 million veterans have enrolled in VA's health care system, the proposal

(continued on page 5)

Inside This Edition

Could You Have Hep C and Not Know It?	2
A Word from the Director	
"Key Drivers Move Us In the Right Direction"	2
New VA Health Care Web Site ...	3
Parkinson's Disease Seminar	3
HVAMC Support Groups	4
Just the Blues or Something More?	4
Immunizations: Not Just For Kids . . .	5
VA Work Program	6
American Heroes' Health Fair	6
Tips on How to Take Care of Yourself After Discharge from the Hospital	7
The DASH Diet	7

Special Note:

American Heroes' Health Fair
Friday, October 17, 2003
10 a.m. - 3 p.m.
Houston VA Medical Center
Gymnasium
Open to All Enrolled Veterans.

Treatment is available, but it's not a cure. You can live many, many years without problems if you take care of yourself. . .

Did You Know You Could Have Hepatitis C and Not Even Know It?

HOUSTON, TX - Did you know you could have hepatitis C and not even know it? It's true. Hepatitis C is a multifaceted disease of the liver caused by an infection with the hepatitis C virus. It is the most common blood-borne infection in the U.S., affecting approximately 4 million people. Most people infected with this disease have few, if any symptoms, and feel for the most part, very normal. For some persons, the most common symptom is extreme fatigue. On top of that, hepatitis C is sometimes very difficult to diagnose. The only way to tell if you have been infected with hepatitis C is to have a blood test.

These are just two key reasons why every veteran who is seen in the Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC) Prime Care Clinic is screened for hepatitis C.

"About 85 percent of vets who come in for treatment at the Houston VA Medical Center are screened upon their initial visit to the medical center by their primary care provider, by the second or third visit almost 100 percent of the patients have been screened for this disease," said Shahriar Tavakoli-Tabasi, M.D., manager of the HVAMC Hepatitis C Clinic.

"In a short time, VA has established the largest screening and testing program for hepatitis C infection in the world," said Thomas C. Horvath, M.D., HVAMC chief of staff. "Hepatitis C testing, treatment, and research are among VA's highest health priorities."

The age groups most affected by hepatitis C are veterans of the Korean and Vietnam eras before the disease was well known. However, you may have received contaminated blood before tests to identify blood donors with hepatitis C were available or when they were less precise than they are now.

Hepatitis C is not spread by kissing or hugging, sneezing, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, sitting next to someone, or even holding someone's hand. Hepatitis C is spread primarily by coming in contact with an infected person's blood.

Hepatitis C is a serious disease because it can progress to cirrhosis and severe liver damage. In some people, the progression is very slow while in others, it can happen very quickly. Most people with hepatitis C carry the virus their entire life. Most of these people do have some liver damage, but many do not feel sick from the disease.



HVAMC Hepatitis C Clinic Manager Shahriar Tavakoli-Tabasi, M.D. examines veteran Margarito C. Vasquez. "While aggressive treatment of Hepatitis C is extremely important, education is equally as important. At the Houston VA Medical Center, using education, we are trying to take away the phobia people have about hepatitis C," said Tavakoli-Tabasi.

Some people with liver damage due to hepatitis C may develop cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver and liver failure in 20 to 30 years, while others only have mild liver damage in that time. Medical studies examining people with hepatitis C have strongly linked drinking alcohol, even only a few drinks a day, to a significant increase in the rate and chance of liver damage.

Interferon and ribavirin are two drugs used to treat chronic hepatitis C. Combination therapy, using pegylated

interferon and ribavirin, is currently the treatment of choice.

While using these and other medications, doctors at the HVAMC want to provide complete care for veterans with hepatitis C, not just dispense medication. This means also treating veterans for possible depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and alcohol or drug abuse.

"Education is the key in managing hepatitis C," said Tavakoli-Tabasi. "Veterans must understand that alcohol, even in small amounts, has a direct effect on the treatment and management of their disease. Alcohol is a very strong factor leading to liver failure." Studies have shown alcohol increases the rate of damage caused to the liver by hepatitis C, and it interferes with the medications used to treat the disease.

A major goal of the HVAMC is to increase awareness and education about hepatitis C, not only in the veteran population, but also among family members of veterans, HVAMC health care providers, and the community at large.

Every veteran who is referred to the HVAMC Hepatitis C Clinic receives a computerized presentation, a handout prepared by the VA Centers of Excellence for Hepatitis C, and a 40-minute visit with the hepatitis C physician. This visit focuses on patient education and the disease.

"While aggressive treatment of hepatitis C is extremely important, education is equally as important. There are three key points in educating veterans and the public. First, treatment is available, but it's not a cure. You can live many, many years without problems if you take care of yourself. Second, hepatitis C is contagious mainly through blood and sharp objects such as razors. It's mainly transmitted through blood," said Tavakoli-Tabasi. "And finally, hepatitis C patients must change their lifestyles to avoid alcohol altogether. Hepatitis C plus alcohol greatly increases the changes of liver failure. Abstaining from alcohol can prolong a veteran's life. At the Houston VA Medical Center, using education, we are trying to take away the phobia people have about hepatitis C."

For more information or to be screened, contact your HVAMC Prime Care provider. You are also invited to attend the HVAMC Hepatitis C Support Group that meets the first Friday of every month in Prime Care Clinic #4 at 1:30 p.m. ■ Veda McDonald, Emerging VA Leadership Program Mentee

A Word from the Director . . .

Key Drivers Keep Us Moving In The Right Direction

HOUSTON, TX - As we reach the end of one fiscal year and begin the next, it is time to take stock of what the Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC) has accomplished and look to the future. As we review each of our key drivers, it is clear we have made significant progress. But even with our success, there are still many opportunities for improvement.

"Improving Quality" is the first of our seven key drivers. In this area, the HVAMC has much to be proud of, including a successful site visit that contributed to our VISN winning the Kizer Quality Award, an Office of the Inspector General visit that documented the high quality of care we deliver to the veterans we serve, four positive Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) program surveys, a productive Paralyzed Veterans of America site visit, and most importantly, encouraging feedback from our veterans.

For the key driver of "Improving Access," HVAMC eliminated the waiting lists that existed in January. We reduced the waiting times for all clinics, although several still need additional improvements to meet our standards. We also implemented a new triage center and expanded our primary care teams. We are now working toward the 2004 opening of a Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Galveston.

Our diligent efforts in the area of "Veteran Satisfaction" have begun to pay

off. Recent surveys of both inpatient and outpatient services reveal noticeable improvements. HVAMC staff members are working hard in many areas of the medical center, most notably, the Pharmacy, the Eye Clinic, and Inpatient Medicine. As these and other initiatives continue to grow, we expect even better results in the future.

"Improving Functional Status" is the fourth key driver. We have seen discernible improvements in our Rehabilitation Programs, the expansion and success of our Transitional Work Experience program, and, of course, the positive CARF accreditations mentioned before.

Our fifth key driver is being "Cost Efficient." We have made progress on many dimensions of efficiency as compared with similar medical centers. In addition, we have collected more money from private insurance companies through our Medical Care Cost Recovery program than ever before. All of this money stays in Houston to provide better services to our veterans, pay our doctor and nurse salaries, and buy medications for our pharmacy.

We made great strides in "Building Healthier Communities" through our efforts in education and research, and our efforts in reducing the nursing shortage. On a regular basis, HVAMC nurses teach at local nursing schools, and along with other medical centers in the Houston-Galveston area, the HVAMC strongly supports strategies to increase enrollment at these schools. Our teaching programs in psychology and dentistry were



Edgar L. Tucker, Medical Center Director

recently reviewed and reaccredited. HVAMC staff members were successful in publishing numerous articles in several highly regarded medical journals. Our Health Services Research & Development program won designation as a National Center for Measurement.

Finally, in order to become an "Employer of Choice" and provide a rewarding and satisfying work environment to attract the most qualified and talented individuals, we are making progress in our efforts to achieve Magnet Status for our nursing program. We fully expect a successful site review next February.

There are many more improvements that have been introduced and much more yet to do. The staff at HVAMC is committed to this continuous challenge for improvement. Their achievements are significant and, I believe, excellent predictors for future success.

My HealthVet is a web-based application that creates a new, online environment where veterans, family, and clinicians may come together to optimize veterans' health care . . .

VA Tackles the World Wide Web With New Tools to Improve Veteran Health Care

WASHINGTON - The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is in the process of unveiling the newest Internet-based program for veterans, "My HealthVet." VA created My HealthVet because veterans wanted better, faster access to their own health information, and they wanted to take a more active role in managing their own health care.

A 2001 National Survey of Veterans asked the question, "Do you have access to the Internet?" and 62 percent of the veterans responded yes. VA understands that most veterans have children and family that use the Internet, too.

My HealthVet is a web-based system that empowers veterans with information and tools so that they can improve their health to the maximum extent possible. Participating veterans are able to obtain electronic copies of key portions of their electronic health records. This record is stored in a secure and private environment called an eVault where all the data is encrypted.

The eVault will be personalized with appropriate links to useful explanatory material to help veterans understand what is in their record, and what they can do to improve their health condition. Veterans can also add structured medical information in the "self-entered" section of their eVault.

The Health Ed Library section includes about 18 million pages of information about health conditions, medical procedures, medications, and resent health news, as well as health tools. The veteran "owns" his/her personal health record and has complete control over who can view or update it.

If they want to, the veteran can give another person full access to view their copies of the VA data, as well as view and update their "self entered" data. The veteran can also give limited access to an individual to only view certain subjects.

Do you use the Internet?

Then you can use My HealthVet.

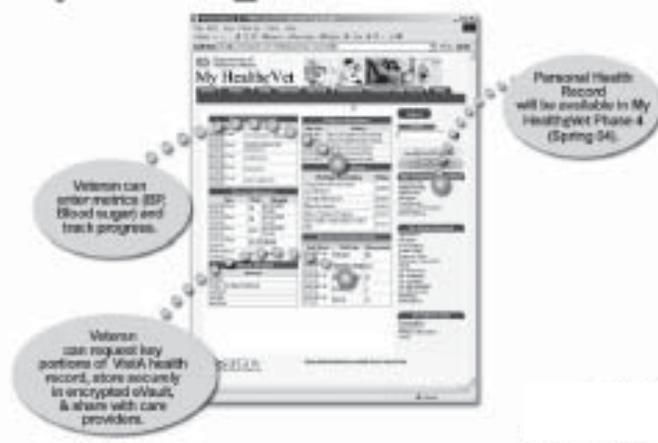
My HealthVet is an Internet-based program that helps you work better with your health care providers and your family to achieve the best possible health.

It will allow you to: 1) Get VA information and services online, 2) Enter your own health information in a personal and secure section that you control, 3) Record and track personal metrics such as blood pressure readings or blood sugar levels, 4) Research consumer friendly health care educational information, and 5) View key portions of your VA health record.

What are the features of My HealthVet?

Joining the My HealthVet program is by choice. My HealthVet will allow you to: 1) Read key parts of your VA medical record from any computer with Internet access, 2) Add information about your medications, allergies, tests, medical history, and visits to non-VA doctors to your personal section that you control, 3) Keep track of your health status by entering your personal health metrics,

My HealthVet



such as blood pressure readings or blood sugar levels, 4) Access a veterans' health library with medical conditions, medications, health news, and preventive health, 5) View health information developed by VA specifically for veterans, 6) Use tools such as a prescription checker, health calculators, and self assessment tools, 7) Link easily to benefits and resources available in VA and other federal sources, 8) Refill prescriptions online, 9) View your next appointment date and time online, 10) View your total co-payment balance online, and 11) Give access to all or some of your health information to others, such as VA doctors, other doctors, family, and veteran advocates.

How can My HealthVet improve my health?

My HealthVet will give veterans like you quick access to your health information. You will be able to use My HealthVet to take a more active role in managing your health care.

With My HealthVet, you will be able to 1) Learn more about your health, 2) Find ways to improve your health and prevent health problems, 3) Read parts of your VA medical record from home and refresh your memory of the doctor's instructions, 4) Keep all your health information in one place by entering it into your personally controlled account, 5) Avoid extra visits to the doctor by giving your doctors access to see the daily metrics - such as blood pressure, blood sugar, weight, and pulse - that you have measured at home and recorded in My HealthVet, 6) Avoid treatment delays if something is wrong - if the doctor sees anything worrisome in your self-entered metrics, he/she can ask you to come in without waiting until your next scheduled appointment, 7) Improve your total care by sharing your record with all your doctors - both VA and outside, and 8) Let veteran advocates, such as veteran service officers (VSOs), see your record in order to assist you in the claims process.

health care provider(s) within or outside the VA health care system.

Where can I see it?

Veterans are participating in a pilot at VA Medical Centers in Tampa, Florida; Washington, DC; Portland, Oregon; and upstate New York.

To log in to the pilot as a test patient, go to <http://www.health-evt.va.gov/> and use the following:

Username: demouserb

Password: password_\$1

Ongoing patient feedback from the pilot is being used to identify and build features for the national release. The national release will look quite different than the pilot, and will offer more features. A content demo is available on the Web at <http://www.acs-fbc.com/mbv/>

When can I start using My HealthVet?

Four releases for this new project are planned in the next year.

Summer 2003—A Web page with VA-developed information, a health education library, and self-assessment tools

Fall 2003—Prescription refill and self-entered data (except self-entered metrics)

Winter 2004—View total co-payment balance, view next scheduled appointment, and self-entered metrics

Spring 2004—VA health record data

Where do I get more information about My HealthVet?

For more information, email Ginger Price at ginger.price@med.va.gov. ■

Houston Veterans Affairs Medical Center Presents Special Parkinson's Disease Seminar:



"Update on Parkinson's Disease: Medications, Research & Care"

WHEN: Thursday, September 18, 2003, 6:30 - 8 p.m.

WHERE: Houston VA Medical Center 4th Floor Auditorium

WHAT: A free educational program for veterans, family members, and friends entitled, "An Update on Parkinson's Disease: Medications, Research & Care" featuring guest speaker Eugene C. Lai, M.D., Ph.D., director of the HVAMC PADRECC and a panel of experts for a Question & Answer session. Light refreshments will be served.

CONTACT: If you plan to attend or need more information, please call Naomi Nelson, Ph.D. at (713) 794-8938 by September 17, 2003.

INFO: Parkinson's Disease is a serious health problem in the U.S. The National Parkinson Foundation, Inc. estimates that up to 1.5 million Americans have the disease and that approximately 50,000 new cases are diagnosed each year. VA medical centers treat at least 20,000 Parkinson's disease patients every year.

We're Here to Help . . .

Cancer Support Group

The group meets the first Tuesday of every month, 1-2 p.m. in the Nursing Unit (NU) 4D dayroom. Group facilitator: Lisa Whipple, LMSW and Chaplain Douglas Ensminger, D.Min., (713) 791-1414, ext. 5273

Pain Support Group

The group meets every Wednesday and Thursday, 2 p.m. in Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, PhD, (713) 794-8794

Pain Education Group

The group meets every Wednesday, 1 p.m. in Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, PhD, (713) 794-8794

Pain Coping Skills Group

The group meets every Thursday, 1 p.m. in Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, PhD, (713) 794-8794

Better Breather's Club

The group meets the last Wednesday of every month, 1:30-3:30 p.m. in Room 1C-361. Group facilitator: Paula Denman, (713) 794-7317

Stroke Support Group

The group meets second and fourth Thursdays of every month, 3 p.m. in the NU 2A Rehab Dining Room. Group facilitator: Laura Lawhon and Tommie Espinosa, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4241/5254

Amputee Support Group

The group meets first and third Thursdays of every month, 3 p.m. in the NU 2A Rehab Dining Room. Group facilitator: Betty Baer or Roger McDonald, (713) 794-7793

Prostate Cancer Support Group

The group meets third Thursdays of every month, 2 p.m. in Room 4C-122. Group facilitator: Lillie Sonnier, (713) 794-7111

Hepatitis C Support Group

The group meets the first Friday of every month, 1:30 p.m. in Primecare Clinic 4 (NASA) Room 1A-442. Group facilitator: Collene Gasca and Alana Howard, (713) 791-1414, ext. 3656

HIV Support/Educational Group

The group meets every Tuesday, 2 p.m. in Clinic 4, Room 1A-442 and every Thursday, 10 a.m. in Clinic 4, Room 1B-318. Group facilitator: Susan Sievers, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6183 or 5292

Lufkin Hypertension Classes

The class meets the first Thursday of every month, 2 p.m. Ask your nurse or your Primecare provider, or stop by the front desk at the Lufkin Outpatient Clinic to register for this class.

New Patient Orientation Clinic

(continued from page 1)

80 participants.

At the registration desk, each veteran receives a tote bag, a refrigerator magnet with the VA Network Telecare number on it, and a personal health journal. The journal is already packed with valuable information about such topics as food and drug interactions, VA benefits, patient rights and responsibilities, and common laboratory tests. The HVAMC Veteran Information Packet (VIP) is also included in the journal. The VIP contains information about the VA enrollment process, the eligibility criteria, how to make or cancel appointments, how to get prescriptions refilled, and how to find your way around the HVAMC.

Wrapping up each session, Charles Wright, Ph.D., HVAMC preventive medicine coordinator, asks veterans to complete a preventive medicine-screening questionnaire. He also provides initial smoking counseling and offers several immunizations. The preventive medicine section clerks on site enter participants' preventive medicine information into their individual HVAMC electronic medical record, all in preparation for the veteran's first HVAMC doctor appointment.

Finally, veterans are also invited on a tour of the HVAMC with stops at X-ray, the Prime Care Clinics, the blood laboratory, the outpatient pharmacy, and the Canteen.

Feedback from veterans has been overwhelmingly positive, but already, class organizers have taken several veteran suggestions and implemented them to provide more what the audience wants.



"One unique aspect of the New Patient Orientation Clinic is that each veteran receives a copy of their first primary care provider clinic visit appointment letter and has an opportunity to clarify and ask questions about the appointment during this class. When veterans require assistance, for instance, with either scheduling their next clinic visit or obtaining a new VA identification card, the staff at the New Patient Orientation Clinic solves the issue right there, right then," said Paulette Russell-Wilson, Ph.D., R.N., one of the key coordinators of the New Patient Orientation Clinic. Above, Russell-Wilson welcomes over 80 participants to a recent class.

"One unique aspect of the New Patient Orientation Clinic is that each veteran receives a copy of their first primary care provider clinic visit appointment letter and has an opportunity to clarify and ask questions about the appointment during this class. When veterans require assistance, for instance, with either scheduling their next clinic visit or obtaining a new VA identification card, the staff at the New

Patient Orientation Clinic solves the issue right there, right then," said Paulette Russell-Wilson, Ph.D., R.N., one of the key coordinators of the New Patient Orientation Clinic.

If you would like more information about the next New Patient Orientation Clinic at the HVAMC, call (713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1-800-639-5137. ■ Bobbi D. Gruner, HVAMC Public Affairs Officer

Is It Just the "Blues" or Something More?

HOUSTON, TX - We all feel "down" or "blue" at times. However, if these feelings are very strong or last for a long time, they may be due to a medical illness — depression.

This illness can be treated, but it is often not recognized by patients and VA health care providers. Some of the warning signs of depression are listed below.

If you have four or more of the warning signs of depression, you should be sure to talk with your VA health care provider about depression. *Do not delay!*

Warning Signs of Depression

- ✓ Feeling sad, hopeless, or guilty
- ✓ Loss of interest and pleasure in daily activities
- ✓ Sleep problems (either too much or too little)
- ✓ Fatigue, low energy, or feeling "slowed down"
- ✓ Problems making decisions or thinking clearly
- ✓ Crying a lot
- ✓ Changes in appetite or weight (up or down)
- ✓ Thoughts of suicide or death

Low self-esteem or not feeling very good about yourself, is an experience shared by many people. It can cause and contribute to depression, relationship difficulties, and poor occupational

advancements, to name a few of the common problem areas.

While anyone can feel a little down on himself or herself occasionally, having several of the following symptoms may suggest that you are suffering the effects of low self-esteem.

Symptoms of Low Self-Esteem

- ✓ One shouldn't expect much from life
- ✓ I am not of much use to anyone
- ✓ What I think or feel is not very important
- ✓ Overall, I feel like a failure
- ✓ At times, I feel worthless as a person

If several of these statements describe your feelings, you may want to talk with your VA health care provider about this. He or she can help you decide if seeing a mental health professional would be of benefit to you.

Remember, depression is a medical illness. Getting professional help is important.

Here are some things you can do to help yourself feel better. Set realistic goals. Do not expect to return to your normal self overnight. Break larger tasks into smaller ones so that you feel less overwhelmed. Try to spend time with other people who are supportive.

Let your family and friends help you. Participate in activities that make you feel better. Some exercise or entertainment activities may help.

If you need to talk to someone right away, call the VA Network Telecare Center at (713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1 (800) 639-5137. Professionally trained registered nurses are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. ■

If you were never immunized or never had these vaccine-preventable diseases, you are at risk . . .

Immunizations: Not Just Kids' Stuff

HOUSTON, TX - Lots of people think "shots" or immunizations are just for kids. They're not! As an adult, you need to be protected against measles, mumps, rubella, tetanus, diphtheria, pneumococcal disease, influenza, and varicella. You may also need protection against hepatitis A and B.

Your best protection against these diseases? Immunization! Many people think diseases like polio, mumps, and measles have been wiped out. This is not the case. During 1995, at least 39 percent of all reported measles cases in the United States occurred in persons 20 years of age or older.

If you were never immunized or never had these vaccine-preventable diseases, you are at risk. If you were immunized as a child, you may need updating because some immunizations lose their effectiveness over time. To find out what shots you may need or where to get immunizations, talk with your VA health care provider during your next appointment.

Remember . . . immunizations are not just kids' stuff!

Measles

Measles was once thought to be a disease of young school-age children, but now it often affects teenagers and young adults. Measles is a virus spread by contact with an infected person or the airborne virus. The symptoms usually include a high fever, rash, runny nose, red eyes, and cough. Measles can cause serious illnesses such as pneumonia and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

A pregnant woman who contracts measles is at increased risk for miscarriage or premature labor. The measles vaccine is routinely administered as part of the combination Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) shot. Two doses of measles vaccine generally provide lifelong protection and are required for entrance into post-secondary institutions in at least 29 states.

Rubella

Rubella (German measles) is caused by a virus that is spread by contact with

infected people or articles they have used. Symptoms can include rash, muscle pain, low-grade fever, and swelling in the neck. If a pregnant woman gets rubella, especially during the first three months of pregnancy, she may miscarry, or her baby may be born with birth defects or even die. As many as five million women of childbearing age are not protected against rubella.

Over 90 percent of adults 40 years of age and older are immune to rubella, but if you are concerned about your risk, consult your VA health care provider.

Mumps

Mumps is mainly a disease of young children, but about 15 percent of reported cases occur among teens and adults. Mumps vaccine is routinely administered as part of the MMR shot. Mumps vaccine is recommended for children, teens, and susceptible adults.

Tetanus & Diphtheria

Tetanus, also known as lockjaw, is caused by bacteria that enter the body through a break in the skin (often a puncture wound or deep scratch). Tetanus causes painful muscle contractions, especially in the jaw and stomach. About 40 percent of people who get tetanus die.

Diphtheria is caused by bacteria passed from one person to another in the droplets released when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Symptoms of diphtheria include sore throat, fever, and swollen neck glands. As the disease progresses, a membrane is formed in the throat that blocks breathing, and which may cause death. One out of every 10 people who gets diphtheria dies from it.

Adults should have a tetanus and diphtheria (Td) combination shot once every 10 years to ensure protection. If you haven't had at least three Td shots in your lifetime, or if you're not sure if you have, you will need to complete your basic series of three shots and follow up with booster doses every 10 years.

Pneumococcal Disease

Pneumococcal disease is caused by bacteria that can cause pneumonia as well as other serious complications. Pneumo-

coccal disease kills about 40,000 people each year in the United States. The pneumococcal vaccine is recommended once for all people age 65 and over, as well as for people of any age with certain chronic illnesses. Fewer than 45 percent of people age 65 and over have had their recommended "pneumonia shot."

Influenza

Influenza is a very contagious disease with symptoms that include fever, chills, headache, sore throat, dry cough, runny nose, and body aches. This disease is spread by direct contact with an infected person or through contact with the airborne virus.

Influenza vaccine is recommended every Autumn for all people age 50 and over, for people of all ages who have chronic diseases, or for anyone of any age who wants to reduce the risk of contracting "flu." A flu shot can be given at any time during the Autumn or Winter but is most effective when it is given from early October to mid-November, before the flu season begins.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is a viral infection of the liver that can cause fever, yellow skin and eyes, loss of appetite, and nausea. It is spread by household or sexual contact with an infected person. You can also catch it by eating contaminated food (including shellfish from polluted water) or drinking contaminated water.

Hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for international travelers; persons in communities with high rates of the disease and periodic outbreaks; men who have sex with men; street drug users; recipients of certain blood products; and individuals with chronic liver disease.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a serious liver disease caused by a virus. The hepatitis B virus (HBV) is spread by contact with blood or other body fluids of an infected person. HBV can enter the blood stream, attack the liver, and cause severe illness, even death.

Hepatitis B vaccine is recommended for the following moderate- to high-risk groups: health care workers likely to have blood or needle-stick exposures; clients and staff of institutions for the developmentally disabled; hemodialysis patients; men who have sex with men; people who have more than one sex partner in six months; people with sexually transmitted diseases; users of injectable street drugs; recipients of certain blood products; household members and sexual contacts of HBV carriers; infants born to HBV-positive mothers; inmates of long-term correctional facilities, and people who were born in countries where hepatitis B is common.

For The Record

The best way to be sure you're protected against these preventable diseases is to keep a complete lifetime immunization record (you can pick one up from your VA health care provider). Every time you receive a shot, have your VA health care provider update your record. If you're not sure which immunizations you've already had or which additional immunizations you may need, ask your VA health care provider. ■

New VA Clinics

(continued from page 1)

recommends several changes for the Houston area.

In order to expand capacity for outpatient care, the proposal recommends seven new outpatient clinics in the vicinities of Galveston, Conroe, Tomball, Katy, Richmond, and Lake Jackson. In addition, the current Lufkin outpatient clinic would be relocated to a larger facility in Lufkin using a lease arrangement.

For details about other Texas VA facilities, visit the VA's Web site at <http://www.va.gov/CARES>.

In 1999, a General Accounting Office study found that VA was spending a million dollars a day, or \$3.6 billion during a decade, on unneeded or unused facilities. The average age of VA's 5,044 buildings is more than 50 years, and the need to reduce vacant space and unneeded buildings has been the focus of several reports.

CARES was developed to identify the infrastructure VA will need to care for veterans in the 21st century, redirecting resources from unneeded buildings to veterans' care.

"I'm grateful for the support of President Bush, who has been a strong proponent of improving care for veterans while making VA a wiser user of the taxpayer's money," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi. "Savings from CARES will be retained locally and used locally to strengthen health care services for local veterans."

On November 30, 2003, after holding public hearings to garner comments from veterans and other stakeholders, the commission will present its recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for a final decision. Secretary Principi will make that final decision in December. ■

Houston VA Medical Center
2002 Holcombe Blvd.
Houston, Texas 77030
(713) 791-1414
www.houston.med.va.gov

Edgar L. Tucker, BA, MPH, CHE, Director
Adam C. Walms, MHA, MA, Associate Director
Thomas B. Horvath, MD, FRACP, Chief of Staff
Deloris W. Leftridge, RN, MSN, CNA, Chief Nurse Executive/Clinical Practice Office
Maurilio Garcia-Maldonado, MD, Beaumont Outpatient Clinic Care Line Executive
Anthony Zollo, MD, Lufkin Outpatient Clinic Care Line Executive
Bobbi D. Gruner, Public Affairs Officer/Editor

This publication is funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs and is an authorized publication for veterans of the Houston VA Medical Center. Contents of the newspaper are not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, the United States Government or the Department of Veterans Affairs. *VA Pride* is produced bimonthly by Houston VA Medical Center Public Affairs, Room 4A-310, mailcode 580/00X, telephone number (713) 794-7349, email address vahouexternalaffairs@med.va.gov, and fax number (713) 794-7971. Your comments, suggestions, ideas, and questions are always appreciated. All submissions are subject to editing and will not be returned to the sender.



HVAMC Prime Care nurse, Nancy Ferguson, LVN, gives veteran H. W. Strain his annual flu shot. In the United States, flu is responsible for around 114,000 hospitalizations and 20,000 deaths each year. Although most flu occurs in children, it is the most dangerous to people over 65 years of age or people with medical conditions that make them more likely to have flu complications. Flu complications include pneumonia or the worsening of acute or chronic respiratory diseases.

Veterans Industries has provided vocational rehabilitation services to veterans for decades and yet, little is known outside of the VA about the treatment successes of these programs . . .

Houston VA Work Program Offers Veterans A "Way Back"

HOUSTON, TX – Lawrence Sanders, an Army veteran, has always dreamed of opening his own vehicle detail shop. He has encountered a few bumps along the way, but now believes he is back on track. "Everybody has dreams and goals, and I'm trying to find my way back," he said. Sanders admits he got mixed up with the wrong crowd a few years ago and made some mistakes in judgment. "I've paid my dues for that and now I want a better life. It's all about attitude."

This past March, Sanders started in the Incentive Therapy (IT)/Veterans Industries (VI) program with the Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC), then advanced to the Transitional Work Experience program (TWE). Five days a week, eight hours a day, you will recognize him as the smiling and affable housekeeping aide on the hospital's 4th floor, taking care of the auditorium, business offices, and the Oncology Clinic. "I think this job will give me the break I need to get back on my feet and into the workforce, plus I enjoy talking with everyone around here," said Sanders.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) maintains over a hundred Veterans Industries Work Therapy programs nationwide. Approximately 7,000 veterans complete these programs each year. Veterans Industries is a therapeutic work-for-pay program in which the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) contracts with private industry and federal agencies for work performed by veterans.

These Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) programs were established in the 1950s. The majority of veterans involved participate in outpatient mental health programs, and live in VA domiciliary or supportive housing in the community.

At the HVAMC, the comprehensive treatment plan for patients with substance use or misuse, or mental health problems includes assessment and referral for

vocational rehabilitation services. This program began at the HVAMC in 1994, and each veteran is offered an opportunity to participate in TWE.

Last April, TWE significantly expanded at the HVAMC to include two certificate-training programs in the areas of housekeeping and patient escort. During these 90-day on-the-job training programs, some veterans receive a certificate that documents their proficiency in hospital linen processing duties while other veterans may receive a general housekeeping certificate.

Veterans with the desire to develop more advanced skills receive classroom and on-the-job training in hospital safety, body mechanics, patient room cleaning, equipment operation, proper handling of biohazard trash, customer service standards, infection control, special procedures for transporting wheelchair and stretcher patients, and techniques to clean critical care areas such as surgical suites, spinal cord units, and nursing home areas.

In addition to the housekeeping and patient escort training programs, veterans receive valuable work experience in shipping and receiving, medical supply, grounds keeping, food service, and wheelchair repair. HVAMC management has already expanded the TWE program to other job sites. In May, eleven veterans began work as grounds keepers at the Houston National Cemetery.

Veterans Industries has provided vocational rehabilitation services to veterans for decades and yet, little is known outside of the VA about the treatment successes of these programs. Recently, a segment of the video "VI/CWT Partnering with America's Veterans" was filmed at the HVAMC.

The goal of this video is to challenge corporations searching for quality workers to consider an invaluable and greatly



Transitional Work Experience program participant, Lawrence Sanders (left), stops and talks with Peggy Moore, assistant manager of the HVAMC Environmental Management Section. Five days a week, eight hours a day, you will recognize Sanders as the smiling and affable housekeeping aide on the HVAMC's 4th floor, taking care of the auditorium, business offices, and the Oncology Clinic. "I think this job will give me the break I need to get back on my feet and into the workforce, plus I enjoy talking with everyone around here," said Sanders.

underutilized resource, a veteran. The HVAMC Veterans Industries program has been accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities since 1999, and recently received reaccreditation until 2005.

Of the TWE program at the HVAMC, Sanders said, "I didn't want to go through another drug program. Too many just don't work. Here at the VA, it was different. I started listening to the counselors and the possibilities. It's about the best program I've come across. It's motivation. The counselors give us motivation. They don't treat us like criminals or addicts. They don't classify us

as that was what you were, that's what you will be. The program here gives you a better outlook, keeps your motivation high, builds up your self-esteem, keeps your head clear."

Sanders is also pursuing his dreams by starting a vehicle detail business out of his home. "The VA offered me a second chance. You have to stick with it. If you give up, it's over," said Sanders.

If you would like more information about the HVAMC TWE program, call the HVAMC Specialized Evaluation and Rehabilitation Program Director at (713) 794-7116/7044. ■ *Bobbi D. Gruner, Public Affairs Officer*

Houston VA Medical Center invites you to the American Heroes' Health Fair

Friday, October 17, 2003, 10 a.m. – 3 p.m.
HVAMC Gymnasium, 2002 Holcombe Blvd.

(Enter the Old Spanish Trail gate and follow the directional signs.)

★ **No Entrance Fee and Free Flu Vaccines (if vaccine is available)**

Free Heart Healthy Box Lunch and Free Cooking Demonstrations

Information about Prostate Disease, Vascular Disease & Erectile Dysfunction

Find out about Heart Disease, VA Pharmacy, Smoking Cessation, and More!

Diabetes Foot Screening & "Love Your Back & Knees" Exercise Demos

Talk to a HVAMC Social Worker about VA & Community Resources

"Ask the Doc" Booths – Talk with a VA Health Care Provider

Info and Activity Booths for Understanding Your Health

Fun Workouts for Weight Loss plus Yoga Instruction

Free Cholesterol and Blood Pressure Screening

Smart Shopping and Nutrition Tips

All Enrolled Veterans, HVAMC Volunteers, and HVAMC Employees are invited to this FREE event.

Dress comfortably – running/walking shoes are suggested.

After being discharged from the Houston VA Medical Center, many veterans have questions about what they should and shouldn't do to speed along their recovery process . . .

Okay, I Had My Surgery, Now What?

HOUSTON, TX –After being discharged from the hospital, many veterans have questions about what they should and should not do to speed along their recovery process. To answer these questions, the Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC) Operative Care Line provides the following information with the hope it will be useful to you and your loved ones.

Recovering at Home

Your HVAMC doctor or nurse will give you instructions to follow during your recovery. These will help you learn how to care for yourself and heal faster. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask.

For Your Comfort

You may have some pain when discharged depending on the procedure, treatment, or surgery you may have had. Pain medication will help you feel better and you'll heal more quickly. Ask your doctor about other ways to control pain, such as heat, ice, elevation, and relaxation. Pain medication helps you move around with more comfort. Take it only as directed, before pain becomes severe. Do not take it more or less often than you've been instructed. Taking it before bedtime may help you sleep. Taken as directed, pain medication is not addictive.

For Your Safety

Do not drink alcohol as long as you are taking pain medication. Do not drive or use heavy machinery or power tools, because pain medications can make you sleepy. Ask your doctor before taking other medications, herbs, or vitamins.

Coping with Side Effects

Pain medication may cause constipation. Avoid laxatives unless they have been prescribed for you. Instead, increase your fluids and fiber. Tell your HVAMC health care provider if you have stomach pain, nausea, skin rash, itching, or hives.

Call your doctor if you do not experience some pain relief after taking pain medication, if you feel too sleepy, dizzy, or groggy, or if you have side effects like nausea, vomiting, or skin changes like a rash, itching, or hives.

Caring for Your Incision or Wound

When you go home, you may have a dressing to keep the your incision or wound area clean and dry. You may also have a tube or drain in place. Most bandages, tubes, and drains are easy to care for. Follow the instructions you received from your HVAMC doctor or nurse. If possible, keep the incision or wound site higher than your heart when you sit, rest, or sleep. This can help reduce pain and swelling.

Watching for Infection

A slightly red, swollen incision is okay. So is some bleeding or discharge. But if redness, bleeding, or swelling increases, if the incision smells bad, or if it is warm to the touch, you may have an infection. If you notice any of these signs, gently place a clean dressing or cloth over your incision and call your HVAMC health care provider.

A fever can signal infection, so take your temperature twice a day. Call your doctor if it stays above 101 degrees F.

Call your HVAMC doctor if you have signs of infection, bleeding, fever, or if

you have numbness, increased swelling or pain, or bluish fingers or toes.

Keeping Clean

Follow your HVAMC health care team's advice about bathing. Do not shower or bathe until your doctor says it is okay. If you have a dressing, tube, or drain in place, keep it clean and dry. If a tube comes out, do not panic, but do call your doctor right away.

Getting Good Nutrition

Healthy eating helps your body heal itself so try to eat what seems good to you. Your doctor will tell what diet to follow while you recover. Drinking liquids helps you feel better and balances your body's chemicals. Drink six to eight glasses of water a day (six to eight ounces each), unless you've been told otherwise. Watch for dark yellow urine (a sign that you may not be getting enough fluids).

Try foods that are easy to digest such as clear soup, toast, crackers, ginger ale, and gelatin. Avoid fatty foods that stay in your stomach a long time. Eat small amounts more often.

Take Care of Your Lungs

Follow your HVAMC doctor's advice about deep breathing and coughing. It is important to keep your lungs clear. If you are being sent home with a spirometer, use it as you have been shown. You can also use a pillow when you cough. Lastly, to avoid lung problems, **do not smoke.**

Becoming More Active

Unless otherwise instructed by your HVAMC doctor, gradually began moving around and being more active to speed your recovery. Stand up slowly so you do not get dizzy. Get plenty of rest. When discharged from the hospital, you are likely to feel tired so give your body time to heal. Ask your HVAMC doctor when it is safe to get back to more activity. Do not drive until your doctor says it is okay.

Follow-Up Visit

Your HVAMC doctor will check your healing and see that you are recovering safely. You will receive an appointment for your follow-up visit when you are discharged from the hospital.

Returning to Work

Your doctor will tell you when you can return to work. It is often four to six weeks after major surgery and a few days after minor surgery. You may still be tired so take frequent breaks during your workday and rest when you go home.

You Are a Key Member on Your Health Care Team

As a patient, you can help to reduce the incidence of errors in your care by taking a part in the decisions for your own care. Ask questions if you do not understand. You have the right to know. Ask questions before you start taking a new or different medication, or if you think you have been confused with another patient. You can play an important role in preventing hospital errors by telling your doctor when something just does not seem right. You should also tell your doctor all your medical information including allergies and herbal supplements you might be taking. Do not make assumptions that they already know. Ask about test results. Do not assume that "no news is good news." Make sure you know who is in charge of your care. Staying informed about your care prevents medical errors.

Still Have Questions?

You can always contact your HVAMC health care provider with questions you have about your health care. Immediate help is also just a telephone call away. Professionally trained registered nurses at the VA Network Telecare Center, (713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1 (800) 639-5137 are ready to help answer your health care questions 24/7. ■ **Beverly Green-Rashad, RN, MSN, Operative Care Line Nurse Executive**



Bridgette Huggins, RN, Nursing Unit 5E Nurse Manager (left) and Donna Jackson, RN, C answer veteran Michael Webb's questions about how he should care for his surgical incision at home. Each veteran discharged from this unit at the Houston VA Medical Center receives written, comprehensive home care instructions. The goal of this discharge instruction sheet is to inform the veteran of what he or she needs to know during their recuperation phase.

Here's a food plan to help control your high blood pressure . . .

The DASH Diet

HOUSTON, TX - The DASH diet is a Dietary Approach to Stop Hypertension. This is a food plan that helps to both prevent and control your blood pressure. The meal plan encourages a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy foods while limiting saturated fat and total fat.

In fact, the DASH diet suggests four to five servings of fruit a day, four to five servings of vegetables a day, and two to three servings of low-fat dairy a day - more than the average American diet which could be challenging for some individuals!

Another important piece of this diet is eating less fat and salt. Alcohol intake should also be limited. Following these dietary guidelines helps the body to get the important vitamins and minerals it needs including calcium, magnesium, and potassium.

Incorporating regular exercise into your routine, along with following the DASH dietary guidelines will help you to lose weight! A healthy diet, exercise, and weight loss all help to reduce your blood pressure! ■ **Colleen Pointer, HVAMC Dietetic Intern**

Food Groups & Serving Sizes:

5-6 servings of whole grains

- 1 slice whole wheat bread
- ½ cup whole grain cereal
- ½ cup of brown rice or whole wheat pasta
- ½ cup cooked beans, peas, or corn

4-5 servings of vegetables

- 1 cup raw vegetables
- ½ cup cooked vegetables
- ¾ cup of tomato or vegetable juice

4-5 servings of fruits

- 1 medium fruit (about the size of a tennis ball)
- ½ cup fresh, frozen, or canned fruit
- ¼ cup of dried fruit
- ¾ cup fruit juice (100%)

2-3 servings of dairy

- 1 cup low-fat or fat-free milk
- 6 oz. yogurt
- 1 cup low-fat buttermilk

1-2 servings of protein

- 3 oz. cooked lean chicken, turkey, pork, beef or fish
- ¾ cup cottage cheese, 3 oz. cheese, ¾ cup tuna

½-1 serving of nuts

- 1/3 cup or 1½ oz. nuts
- 2 Tbsp. seeds

1-2 servings of fats

- 1 tsp. butter or margarine
- 1 Tbsp. salad dressing or low-fat mayonnaise
- 1/8 of an avocado



From our Veterans

Provided by the Consumer Affairs Staff
HVAMC Room 1B-370, (713) 794-7883

Question: I am worried about my father. Lately, he has not been himself, lashing out at family members. What type of services does the Houston VA offer for this situation?

Answer: The HVAMC Mental Health Care Line offers comprehensive inpatient and outpatient services for veterans with mental health needs. Referral to any of the mental health programs described below is done through the Psychiatric Evaluation and Admission Clinic (PEAC). The hours are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. The PEAC telephone number is (713) 794-7101. For mental health emergencies after hours, please call the Houston VA Medical Center Operator at (713) 791-1414 and ask for the psychiatrist on call.

Question: Will VA provide hearing aids and eyeglasses to me?

Answer: Generally, hearing aids and eyeglasses are not provided when the hearing and vision loss is the result of aging. However, if you are service-connected with a disability rating of

10% or greater they will be provided. Hearing aids and eyeglasses may also be provided in special circumstances.

Question: Am I eligible for travel benefits?

Answer: Travel benefits vary from veteran to veteran, and depend on your specific situation. Call the HVAMC Patient Travel Office at (713) 794-7630 to find out more.

Question: I'm a 20-year military retiree whose retirement pay is cut by the amount I receive from VA for disability compensation. I read the military soon will begin making up this offset. How can I make sure I receive this?

Answer: The military services will make case-by-case decisions if military retirees are eligible for the new program, which is called "Combat-Related Special Compensation." It is for veterans rated at least 60 percent disabled because of armed conflict or certain other conditions, such as hazardous duty, training exercises, or mishaps involving military equipment. VA will provide the

military information from veterans' files that may help determine eligibility.

Veterans may download DD Form 2860 and obtain more information at <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/crsc>. They may also call their branch of service for more information: Army, (866) 281-3254; Navy and Marine Corps., (877) 366-2772; or Air Force, (866) 229-7074.

Question: We hear that veterans are dying at an increasing rate and national cemeteries are running out of burial space. What is VA doing about this?

Answer: VA is developing five new cemeteries in metropolitan areas that now have neither national nor state cemeteries with burial space available. These new cemeteries, plus expansions planned for several existing cemeteries, will advance VA's goal to have 85 percent of veterans living within 75 miles of casket and cremation burial space by 2007. Beyond that date, VA has identified other metropolitan areas that do not have veterans burial space or that will run out of space by 2020 in order to begin planning to fill that need.

Question: Is it true that VA has changed a long-standing policy and now will fill prescriptions by non-VA doctors?

Answer: VA recently announced a program to fill prescriptions written by non-VA physicians for some veterans waiting to see a VA doctor. To be eligible, veterans must have enrolled in VA's health care system and requested their first primary care appointment before July 25, 2003. Also, they must have been waiting more than 30 days on Sept. 22, 2003, when the benefit goes into effect.

Veterans will be charged a VA copayment of \$7 if the medicine is not for a condition related to their military service. This benefit does not apply to veterans who have seen a VA primary

care provider or those waiting for appointments with specialists or follow-up appointments. VA will mail instructions to eligible veterans. For more information, call the toll-free number on VA health benefits: 1-877-222-8387.

Question: I have heard that military service members held as prisoners of war (POW) for less than 30 days do not qualify for VA POW benefits. Is that true?

Answer: Current federal law requires that a former POW must be detained for at least 30 days in order to qualify for the full range of POW benefits. Responding to the needs of service members who were POWs during Operation Iraqi Freedom, President Bush proposed legislation that would eliminate that 30-day requirement.

The proposal also would improve dental care eligibility and exempt former POWs from current co-payments for medications unrelated to service-connected conditions. VA maintains a Web site with information on its benefits for former prisoners of war at <http://www.va.gov/bln/21/Benefits/POW/>.

Question: What is VA's "national shrine commitment?"

Answer: When Congress transferred the national cemetery system from the Army to VA in 1973, it declared these veterans cemeteries "shall be considered national shrines as a tribute to our gallant dead." VA-run national cemeteries are places where the grounds are a beautiful and inspiring tribute to those who sacrificed for the nation's freedom. The "National Shrine Commitment," begun in 2001, is a VA initiative to enhance appearance and maintain a respectful setting in VA national cemeteries. Through 2002, VA had renovated 98,000 gravesites and cleaned or aligned 356,000 headstones or markers.

Important VA Telephone Numbers

Houston VA Medical Center Main Line	(713) 791-1414 or toll-free 1-800-553-2278
VA Network Telecare Center	(713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1-800-639-5137
Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic	(409) 981-8550 or toll-free 1-800-833-7734
Lufkin VA Outpatient Clinic	(936) 637-1342 or toll-free 1-800-209-3120
Pharmacy Refills	(713) 794-7648 or toll-free 1-800-454-1062
Pharmacy Helpline	(713) 794-7653
Appointment Information	(713) 794-7648 or toll-free 1-800-454-1062
VA Eligibility & Enrollment	(713) 794-7288
Patient Education Resource Center (PERC)	(713) 794-7856
VA Police	(713) 794-7106
Vet Center (Post Oak Road)	(713) 682-2288
Vet Center (Westheimer)	(713) 523-0884
Patient Representatives	
Houston	(713) 794-7884
Beaumont	1-800-833-7734 extension 113
Lufkin	(936) 633-2753
Houston National Cemetery	
(281) 447-8686	
VA Regional Office	
Main Number	1-800-827-1000
Compensation/Pension	1-800-827-1000
Home Loans	1-888-232-2571
Education	1-888-442-4551
Insurance	1-800-669-8477
Headstones and Markers	1-800-697-6947

Houston VA Medical Center's POW/MIA Program

Honoring Our Nation's Former Prisoners Of War
And Those Missing In Action

Friday, September 19, 2003
10 a.m.

HVAMC
Recreation
Therapy
Gymnasium

Keynote
Speaker:
World War II
Prisoner of War
Rev. Paul H. Banet

For more
information,
contact HVAMC
Public Affairs
at (713) 794-7349.

