

Houston VA Receives Accreditation from American College of Radiology

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) has been awarded a full three-year term of accreditation for its radiation oncology services as the result of a recent survey by the American College of Radiology (ACR). The MEDVAMC is the only facility in the state of Texas to receive this accreditation.

The ACR awards accreditation to facilities for the achievement of high practice standards after a thorough peer-review evaluation of its practices. Evaluations are conducted by board-certified radiation oncologists and medical physicists who are experts in the field. They assess the qualifications of the personnel and the adequacy of staff and facility equipment.

"The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center is honored to receive ACR accreditation," said Edgar L. Tucker, MEDVAMC director. "We are very pleased to be recognized in the industry for providing outstanding services. Such a distinction also underscores the quality of our work and our commitment to providing the highest quality of care and safety to our veterans."

The ACR is a national organization serving diagnostic and interventional radiologists, radiation oncologists, and medical physicists with programs for focusing on the practice of medical imaging and radiation oncology and the delivery of comprehensive health care services.

"This accreditation gives our veterans the assurance that our staff and equipment have passed the American College of Radiology's rigorous evaluation. It provides a high level of confidence for patients as well as referring physicians that only the highest quality of care is being provided at our facility. It is a matter of great pride to all of us that our Radiation Oncology Program is the only program in the state of Texas that has been accredited by the ACR," said Meena S. Vij, M.D., MEDVAMC Diagnostic and Therapeutic Care Line executive. ♦

Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center will receive all of the flu vaccine it ordered . . .

Flu Vaccine Available for Veterans in Need at Houston VA

HOUSTON - There has been a great deal of concern and discussion about the availability of Influenza (flu) Vaccine this year; however, veterans should not be alarmed. The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) will receive all of the vaccine it ordered. This shipment is expected to arrive the first week in November. In addition, arrangements have been made to borrow flu vaccine from a sister VA until the MEDVAMC shipment arrives.

Last year, the MEDVAMC gave 19,000 flu shots to patients and staff members. MEDVAMC health care professionals only reached this 19,000 goal after a lengthy and intensive publicity campaign to persuade veterans to get their flu shots.

Although most flu occurs in children, it is 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.

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Spinal Cord Injury Unit nurse Reginald Velasquez, LVN gives veteran Elton Nodier his annual flu shot. To ensure those at greatest risk for complications from the flu receive vaccinations, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center will follow the CDC's Interim Influenza Vaccination Recommendations for distribution of flu shots. Basic public health measures, such as washing your hands and covering your coughs, can make a huge difference in reducing the spread of infection.

Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center will now be able to provide specialized care to more homeless veterans in the Houston area . . .

VA Announces Grant to Houston Group Assisting Homeless Veterans

HOUSTON - In October, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) identified a local non-profit organization, United States Veterans Initiative, Inc. as a grant recipient in the VA's Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program. Recipients in this program are community and faith-based organizations that provide critical services to homeless veterans.

Under this grant, United States Veterans Initiative, Inc. partners with the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) to provide care to homeless veterans in the Houston/Galveston area.

The grant provides \$225,000 annually for the next three years for the MEDVAMC to hire a social worker, a registered nurse, and a part time psychiatrist for an expanded program

called Critical Time Intervention (CTI). CTI team members will work with homeless and chronically mentally ill veterans from the MEDVAMC inpatient units to provide intensive case management services after discharge in an effort to prevent veterans from falling back into homelessness.

In addition, the grant also provides \$250,000 annually for the next three years for the United States Veterans Initiative, Inc. to hire two case managers and a social activities director. It will also establish a self-help peer support program called "Vet-to-Vet Program" at the organization's low-income housing facility, Midtown Terrace Suites.

The partnership will also establish essential supportive services to homeless,

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Veterans Day Celebration
November 11, 2004
Downtown Houston
Ceremony, 10 a.m.
Parade of Heroes, 11:30 a.m.
For more details,
call (713) 437-6351.

Patriotism knows no gender and the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center strives to provide health care for all veterans . . .

Women are Veterans, Too

HOUSTON - The Women's Health Center at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) opened almost ten years ago, on April 8, 1996. This "one stop shop" for women includes routine primary care, gynecological services, patient and family education, and preventive medicine. In addition, the MEDVAMC Pharmacy maintains a full line of gender specific medications for women.

Since the birth of this Nation, women have played key roles in serving our country during times of conflict and in times of peace. The history of women serving their country began during the American Revolution and continues today in Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom. Women's service to our country has changed over the years, as society has become more open to the changing roles and contributions that women have to offer.

According to 2003 data, there are 1.6 million female veterans. The VA has responded to the number of growing female veterans by establishing a nation-

wide Center for Women Veterans and the Veterans Health Administration Women Veterans Health Program. Each VA medical center and VA regional office has a Women Veterans Program Manager who helps women understand their benefits and coordinates their care.

"Services here at the Health Center are tailor-made for women's unique health care needs," said Shirley LaDay Smith, R.N., Women Veterans Health Program manager. "Women veterans are provided a variety of preventive, acute and chronic medical care in an appropriate, timely, and compassionate manner. We have comprehensive medical, surgical, and mental health services all in one clinic. In May 1996, our Health Center also began to treat CHAMPVA beneficiaries. These ladies are dependents of 100 percent service-connected veterans. The ultimate goal of the Health Center is to enable women veterans to achieve an optimal level of health, function, and independence."

In fiscal year 2004, 1,796 women veterans received health care services at



The Women's Health Center serves quite a few female veterans who also are employees of the MEDVAMC. These veterans have chosen the VA as their provider of choice. "I find the staff here to be understanding and try to help you anyway they can," said Sharon Heath, a veteran and a MEDVAMC employee. Above, Valerie Hall, LVN (left) performs a triage assessment of Heath prior to her visit with a Women's Health Center physician.

the Health Center at the MEDVAMC. Prime Care health care providers have found hypertension and diabetes to be the top two significant areas of treatment seen in the Health Center. These conditions are not just men's issues, and female patients visiting the MEDVAMC are not only provided treatment but education about them.

Counseling and treatment is also available for survivors of military sexual trauma. Group counseling sessions and support groups are available at the Health Center. A Pain Management for Women Support Group meets every Thursday at 2 p.m. in Room 5B-224. The facilitator, Gabriel Tan, PhD, may be reached at (713) 794-8794.

The Health Center is currently

organizing a Breast Cancer Survivors Support Group. If you are interested in joining, please call (713) 794-7635.

Staff members of the Health Center strive to make sure their female patients are comfortable. For example, female inpatients are provided pink pajamas and robes. A volunteer from the Women Veterans of America visits each inpatient and gives them a folder of important information specifically for women.

The MEDVAMC recognizes the importance of the contributions made by women veterans in the service to their country and the price many have paid to preserve our freedoms. For more information about the Women's Health Center, call (713) 794-7635. ♦ Fran Burke, MEDVAMC Public Affairs Specialist

A Word from the Director . . .

Houston VA Staff Key in Florida Relief Efforts

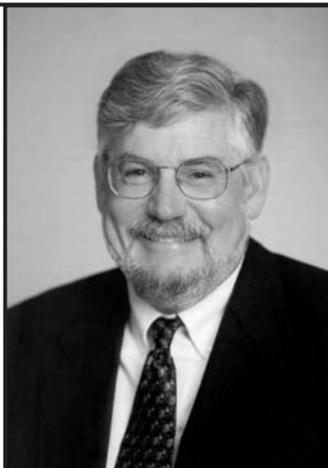
HOUSTON - Charley, Frances, Ivan, Jeanne ... Common names for devastating hurricanes that savaged the state of Florida this fall.

After Charley, the call went out for VA staff to volunteer to assist with recovery efforts. Hundreds of Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) staff volunteered and our Center was asked to send a registered nurse to serve at a special needs facility. Two weeks later, the MEDVAMC deployed a six-person team made up of three registered nurses, a nursing assistant, a pharmacist, and a patient service assistant to lend a hand with Hurricane Frances recovery.

Ivan stormed through Florida and another team from the MEDVAMC, almost twice as large as the first, with a nurse practitioner, five registered nurses, three licensed vocational nurses, and one respiratory therapist headed to Florida.

Finally, after Jeanne, two skilled craftsmen from the MEDVAMC departed for the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center, which suffered extensive water damage from the hurricanes. The team is working to rebuild the facility's acute care unit, replace drywall in approximately 350 rooms, and repair roof damage.

Those chosen to go to Florida represent the high level of professionalism and compassion characteristic of MEDVAMC employees. These staff members worked in emergency shelters, community centers, and VA medical centers caring for those whose lives had been thrown into chaos caused by the storms.



Edgar L. Tucker, Medical Center Director

As we go to press, our two craftsmen are still working long days away from home at the West Palm Beach VA to help veterans in need.

The efforts of our staff helped veterans, VA employees, and our fellow citizens in Florida survive the initial assault of Hurricane Charley and begin the rebuilding after the final flooding left by Jeanne.

We are proud of each of those who gave of themselves to help others. We are also proud of their co-workers who volunteered, but fortunately, were not needed this time. In addition, we want to recognize the staff members who supported the Florida relief effort by pulling together to ensure health care services to veterans at the MEDVAMC were not interrupted.

These are the men and women who serve the veterans here in Houston. These are professionals who accept challenge, serve those in need, and in adversity, display the character, strength, and determination we deeply admire. ♦

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM - ENDURING FREEDOM



ENDURING AND IRAQI FREEDOM VETERANS

VA CAN PROVIDE YOU WITH HEALTH CARE AND BENEFITS ASSISTANCE IF YOU HAVE SERVED IN A RECENT THEATER OF COMBAT OPERATIONS.

If you are a recently discharged veteran with service in a theater of combat operations, VA can provide you free medical care for two years from your discharge from active duty for conditions possibly related to your service, regardless of your income status.

If you require assistance, please contact
Fern A. Taylor, Manager, Patient Access Center
at (713) 794-7034.

VA researchers believe the electrical signals may relieve Parkinson's disease symptoms by blocking incorrect messages processed by the brain.

Patient Recruitment Completed for Deep Brain Stimulator Research

HOUSTON – The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) recently completed recruitment for the VA Cooperative Study, "A Comparison of Best Medical Therapy and Deep Brain Stimulation of Subthalamic Nucleus and Globus Pallidus for the Treatment of Parkinson's Disease." The Houston Parkinson's Disease Research, Education and Clinical Center (PADRECC) is leading this multi-VA medical center study.

The study focuses on a neurosurgical procedure implanting electrodes into a patient's brain and a battery pack into the side of the person's chest wall below the collarbone or in the patient's abdomen. This battery pack delivers electrical signals through a connector or lead wire to the brain cells.

MEDVAMC researchers believe the electrical signals may relieve Parkinson's disease symptoms by blocking incorrect messages processed by the brain in areas that control movement. This procedure was offered to 26 veterans receiving health care at the MEDVAMC who met certain medical criteria.

Eugene C. Lai, M.D., Ph.D., director of Houston PADRECC and Richard K. Simpson, M.D., Ph.D., chief of MEDVAMC Neurosurgery are directing this multi-VA medical center study. Additional patients were enrolled from Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and other VA medical centers in Texas.

In 2001, the VA took a major step toward improving patient care and pursuing a cure for Parkinson's disease by establishing six PADRECCs throughout the U.S., one at the MEDVAMC.

Operating as a national consortium, each PADRECC conducts research covering basic biomedicine, rehabilitation, health services delivery, and clinical trials.

Parkinson's disease is a serious health problem in the United States. 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.



Veteran Edward McCullar (above left) talks with Connie Ward, M.S.N., R.N.-B.C. MEDVAMC PADRECC clinical coordinator after his surgery. McCullar is a participant in the VA's Deep Brain Stimulation study. MEDVAMC researchers believe the electrical signals from electrodes implanted in McCullar's brain may relieve his Parkinson's disease symptoms by blocking incorrect messages processed by his brain in areas that control movement.

Parkinson's disease, one of the more common neurological diseases, is slowly progressive and caused by degeneration of brain cells in a region of the midbrain that produces the neurotransmitter dopamine. Symptoms include tremors, slowness of movement, stiffness of limbs, and problems with gait and balance. At present there is no cure, but treatments do exist and are available.

Since 2001, the Houston PADRECC has evaluated nearly 750 new patients.

Patients seen include those with Parkinson's disease (58%), parkinsonism (8%), essential tremor (14%), atypical tremor (7%), and other related movement disorders (13%).

For more about the Deep Brain Stimulation study, visit the PADRECC Web site at www.va.gov/padrecec_bouston/ or contact Connie Ward, M.S.N., R.N.-B.C., MEDVAMC PADRECC clinical coordinator at (713) 794-8410. ♦ Connie Ward, M.S.N., R.N.-B.C.

New guest house is expected to open in the spring of 2005 and will be large enough to accommodate 21 families . . .

Walls Go Up on New Fisher House in Houston

HOUSTON - Expensive hotel stays and cramped couches will soon be a thing of the past for families of veterans undergoing treatment for long-term or unexpected illnesses, diseases, or injuries at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) when the Houston Fisher House opens in Spring 2005.

Framing of the new home has been finished and the contract builder is now working on roofing and exterior brickwork. Once the Houston home is completed, it will be officially donated to the MEDVAMC for operation, management, and maintenance.

"Great times are coming! Just take

a look on the north side of the Recreation Therapy Gymnasium. I have had the opportunity to see a Fisher House in action, first hand, and can assure you of the wonderful benefits. If I seem anxious, you're right. I am more than ready to get the doors wide open," said Frank Kelley, manager of the Houston Fisher House.

Kelley was the manager of the Fisher House at Biloxi, Mississippi for almost four years before being hired by the MEDVAMC to run the Houston facility. With only a few months left before operation begins, Kelley is busy meeting with veterans and veterans groups spreading the word about the new facility.

"Many people aren't sure how the Fisher House works and there are quite a few myths about staying at one. The first is that only veterans can stay at a Fisher House. Actually anyone can stay in the House as long as they meet the eligibility requirements. Another misperception is that you can stay only one night. The minimum a guest can stay is normally three nights, but there are exceptions. There is no charge for staying at the Fisher House and the House does not replace Courtesy Quarters," said Kelley.

Similar in function to the Ronald McDonald Houses, the Fisher House program, established in 1990 by Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher, provides temporary lodging to families of hospitalized active duty military members and veterans. Other VA Fisher Houses are located in Colorado, Florida, Minnesota, New

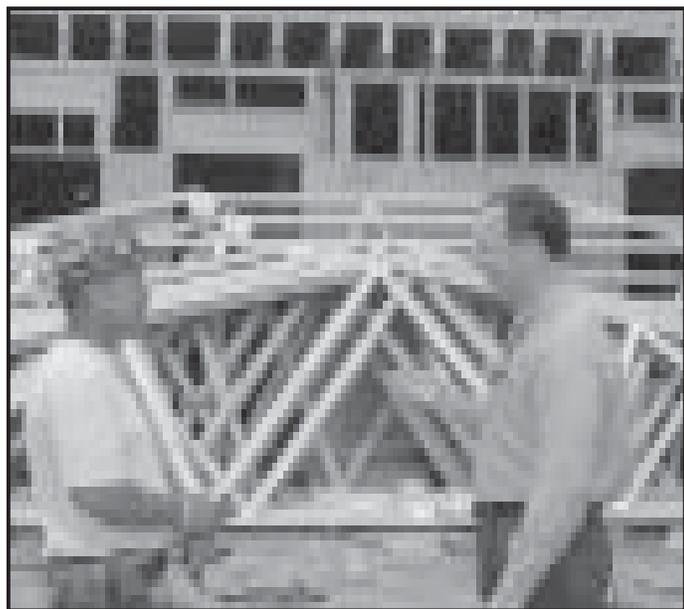
York, and Ohio, and five more homes are being considered in California, New York, Florida, Texas and Washington.

The Houston home will be the largest Fisher House ever built and the seventh donated to the Department of Veterans Affairs by the Fisher House Foundation. This facility will be large enough to accommodate 21 families and each of the 21 suites will include its own private bath.

The house will also provide a communal kitchen, library/living room, dining room, family room, laundry facilities, and a manager's office. Each bedroom has its own bathroom. The Houston design is being considered as the prototype for future houses.

The MEDVAMC has 321 hospital beds, a 40-bed Spinal Cord Injury Center, and a 120-bed transitional care unit for long-term care. In fiscal year 2003, the MEDVAMC served 103,025 enrolled veterans. There were 557,360 outpatient visits at the Houston facility, 49,389 outpatient visits at the Beaumont Outpatient Clinic, and 44,454 outpatient visits at the Lufkin Outpatient Clinic. During the same timeframe, 10,744 veterans were admitted as inpatients and 265 veterans were admitted to the Transitional Care Center.

For more information or to make a donation to the Fisher House, contact Frank Kelley, Houston Fisher House manager at (713) 794-8095 or by email at frank.kelley@med.va.gov. If your group is interested, Kelley is also available to speak at veteran service organization meetings in the community. ♦



In October, Frank Kelley, manager of the Houston Fisher House, checked up on the progress of the new guest house. Above, Kelley talks with Jay Clark, a framing contractor for the Fisher House Foundation. The Houston home will be the largest Fisher House ever built and the seventh donated to the Department of Veterans Affairs by the Fisher House Foundation.

Study: VA Tops Managed Health Plans for Recommended Diabetes Care

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Nearly a decade after VA instituted broad improvements in how it cares for patients with chronic illnesses, a study published in the Aug. 17, 2003 *Annals of Internal Medicine* shows that VA patients with diabetes are more likely to receive recommended tests and have better outcomes than managed care patients.

The study included 1,285 patients with diabetes from five VA medical centers nationwide and 6,920 patients in eight commercial managed-care health plans, ranked among the nation's best in diabetes care by the National Committee on Quality Assurance.

The researchers checked whether patients received seven standard recommended tests or services: eye exam, hemoglobin A1c test (a measure of glucose control), cholesterol screening, foot exam, urine analysis, counseling on aspirin use, and flu vaccine. They also looked at patients' blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar, or hemoglobin A1c. The information had been collected as part of the Translating Research into Action for Diabetes initiative of VA and the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention.

The VA patients were more likely to receive each of the screening measures or preventive services.

For example:

- ✓ 93% of VA patients had an annual hemoglobin A1c test, compared to 83% of managed care patients.

- ✓ 91% of VA patients had an annual eye exam, versus 75% of managed care patients.

- ✓ 98% of VA patients had an annual foot exam, versus 84% of managed care patients.

- ✓ VA patients also had their hemoglobin A1c and LDL cholesterol levels in better check. Blood pressure control was comparable for both sets of patients.

Beginning in 1995, VA instituted a series of quality improvements focused on managing chronic diseases, including diabetes. The changes included performance monitoring, computerization of medical records, disease management programs, patient reminders, and automated feedback to doctors on quality of care. The study authors suggest that VA's national system makes it easier to implement sweeping changes and track the results. ♦

New, Renovated Metro-Lift Bus and Van Stop Opens at Houston VA

HOUSTON - By mid-November 2004, a new transportation waiting area will open at the West Side Entrance (Transitional Care Center Entrance) of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC).

This waiting area, for Metro-Lift Bus riders, Veteran Transportation Network van riders, and other county transportation van riders, will have quite a few extra amenities for our veterans, volunteers, and employees.

The new glassed-in area will allow riders to see their bus or van arrive without waiting outside in the heat, cold, wind, or rain. All the doors will be automatic with wheelchairs and walkers in mind.

"The design will include air conditioning in the waiting room in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act for physically challenged patients. The room will also have a nurse call system in the event of a medical emergency. An exterior access door will be installed for easy access to the bus stop. Furthermore, a telephone will be installed for patron use," said Mouris Ibrahim, MEDVAMC Construction chief.

A volunteer will be stationed at this new waiting area to notify Metro-Lift about departures, give directions, answer questions, and call escort services. A restroom will also be conveniently located in the waiting area.

"The volunteers who will be working this new area understand how the transportation system works. This is im-



Finished with their health care appointments at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, veterans (from right) Lewis Dale, Brijido Juarez, Robert Hall, and Charlie Johnson board a Veteran Transportation Network van to head home to Bay City. On this humid day, volunteer driver and veteran Marce Hill (far left) mentioned that many veterans are looking forward to the opening of the new waiting area.

portant to make sure our veterans' transportation needs are met in a timely and efficient manner," said Nikki Verbeck, MEDVAMC voluntary service specialist.

The new waiting area, located in 1C-262C and 1C-262A, will be open from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m., Monday - Friday.

"I think this is a good idea. I understand this new waiting area will cater to the needs of all veterans. I'm

glad they are keeping veterans in wheelchairs and scooters as their focus for this new area," said veteran Rebecca Johnson.

With free valet parking also available at the main entrance, the MEDVAMC strives to make it easy, quick, and convenient for our veterans to get to and from their appointments. ♦ Hayley Raymer, MEDVAMC Administrative Resident

Support Group Information at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center

We are Here to Help . . .

MS Self-Help Group

The group meets the second Wednesday of every month, 2 - 3:30 p.m. in Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Dining Room. Group facilitators: Lisa Whipple, LCSW and Fe Runtanilla, RN, (713) 794-7951

Cancer Support Group

The group meets the first Tuesday of every month, 1-2 p.m. in Nursing Unit (NU) 4D Dayroom. Group facilitators: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, MSW, (713) 791-1414, ext. 5273 and Chaplain Douglas Ensminger, D.Min., (713) 791-1414, ext. 5273

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

This group meets every Wednesday, 7 p.m., Room 6C-105. Group facilitator: Billy M. (Bo) Cook, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6987

Pain Support Group

The group meets every Wednesday, 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

Pain Management for Women

This group meets every Thursday, 2 p.m. in Room 5B-224. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, PhD., (713) 794-8794

Lufkin Hypertension Classes

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

Better Breather's Club

The group meets the last Wednesday of every month, 1:30 p.m. in Room 3C-371, Home Oxygen Clinic. Group facilitator: Paula Denman, (713) 794-8979

Amputee Support Group

The group meets the first and third Thursday of every month, 3 p.m. in the NU 2A Dining Room. Group facilitators: Betty Baer and Roger McDonald, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4193

Prostate Cancer Support Group

The group meets the third Thursday of every month, 2 p.m. in Room 4C-122. Group facilitators: Lillie Sonnier, (713) 794-7111 and Linda Avery, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6183

Stroke Support Group

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

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 facilitators: Collene Gasca and Delores Vanterpool, (713) 791-1414, ext. 3656

HIV Support/Educational Group

The group meets every Tuesday, 2 p.m. in Clinic 4, Room 1A-442. Group facilitator: Kathy Molitor, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6117/5292

Renal Support Group

This group meets the first Tuesday of every month, 9 a.m. in Room 2A-312. Group facilitator: Juanita Ibarra, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4727

If you are a stroke survivor who has difficulty producing speech, you may be interested in participating in this study investigating ways to help rehabilitate individuals with this condition . . .

Speech Therapy Study for Stroke Survivors

HOUSTON - If you are a stroke survivor with non-fluent aphasia (difficulty producing speech), you may be interested in participating in the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center's Rehabilitation Research and Development study investigating ways to help rehabilitate individuals with aphasia.

What is the Selection Criteria?

Volunteers eligible for the study must have suffered a left-hemisphere stroke at least one year ago and have difficulty speaking. Prior to the stroke, they must have been right-handed and English must have been their primary language. Volunteers should have no history of neurological impairment prior to the stroke, and should be able to see and hear, with corrections, adequately. Volunteers cannot be receiving speech therapy services while participating in this study.

How Much Time is Involved?

Each volunteer will undergo a three-hour speech/language screening to find out if he or she is eligible for the study. If eligible, the volunteer will be randomly assigned (like the flip of a coin) to one of four possible treatment groups.

Two groups meet on an intensive schedule (4 days a week for three weeks) and two groups meet on a distributed schedule (2 days a week for twelve weeks), with a period of testing before, during and after treatment, as well as follow-up testing one month and possibly again six months after the treatment phase.

The total time it takes to complete the study will depend on which group the volunteer is assigned to, but ranges from three to five months, with an additional testing period possible between three and six months post-treatment

What are the Benefits for Participating?

There are no guarantees that volunteers will benefit from this study, but preliminary data suggest that participants may benefit from any or all of the proposed interventions in the form of improved communication and continued opportunities for social interaction. All therapy services in this study are provided at no cost. In addition, the participant will be contributing to our understanding of the rehabilitation of aphasia.

How do I Enroll in the Project?

If you are interested, contact Linda Cerasuolo at (713) 794-7493 or Linda.Cerasuolo@med.va.gov or Lynn M. Maher, Ph.D., faculty and principal investigator of this study at (713) 794-7152 or lmaher@bcm.tmc.edu. ♦ Linda Cerasuolo, MA, CCC-SLP, MEDVAMC Clinical Research Coordinator

Weight gained during the holiday season usually stays with you . . .

Beating the Holiday Bulge

HOUSTON - "Tis the season to get fatter, Fa la la la la..." For many of us, it's almost a given the holiday season will add three to seven pounds to the scale. But not so, says a study conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

Unfortunately, the study also found this weight never came off over the rest of the year. That 0.8 doesn't seem like much, but volunteers in the study also gained an average of 1.4 pounds the rest of the year. Still doesn't seem like much? Well, over five years that may mean another dress size. And it just keeps adding up, year after year. With over half our population classified as overweight, holiday weight gain, or weight gain at

any time, is just not something to hang onto.

There are many tips to keep the holiday left at bay. Houstonians have one great advantage over the rest of the country - mostly great weather throughout fall and winter. Here are a few tips to help:

Stay Active

If you have an exercise routine, don't use the holidays as an excuse to get off schedule. It is more important than ever to keep active during the holidays, because you most likely will be eating more fat and sugar. If you exercise regularly, your body will be better equipped to handle the extra calories. Try to get 30-40 minutes of activity daily. This can be broken into segments, 10 minutes walking to the store, 5 minutes taking the stairs, or 15 minutes

dashing around doing last minute shopping.

Eat Before You Go to That Party

You might think about skipping meals during the day so you can really enjoy a big dinner at night, but this is not the healthy choice. Eat regular meals before the party. Right before you go, drink a couple glasses of water and have some yogurt or fruit. These snacks will keep you from over indulging at the buffet, and the water will take away thirst which can be confused with hunger.

Get Involved with Party Planning

Offer to bring a dish. Veggie or fruit trays are great choices and that way, you'll be sure there are healthy snacks at the party.

Think Small

It's okay to partake in the holiday bounty, but choose smaller portions, or only one item. If the pie or cake is pre-cut, ask to share it with someone. Take half a spoonful instead of a heaping one. Also, use the smallest plate available for your meal.

Be A Picky Eater

Don't eat foods just because they are there. Don't sit down in front of the munchies table. It's too hard to resist. Pay attention to what you are eating and remember to balance your food groups. Maybe try to keep a mental tab in your head about the food groups you've had that day. If you have mashed potatoes (starch), turkey (protein), and fruit salad (fruit) at lunch, try to have more vegetables and a dairy food at dinner.

Common sense and "everything in moderation" can get you through a lot of the holiday nutritional pitfalls. Maybe these tips, along with what you already know about proper nutrition, will help you through the season without having to waste your New Year's resolution on "Lose weight!" ♦ Anne Utech, B.S., MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern

How to Make or Change an Appointment

HOUSTON - If you are already enrolled in the VA system and need to make an appointment at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC), call the VA Network Telecare Center at (713) 794-8985 or toll free 1 (800) 639-5137. This service operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If, for some reason, you cannot keep your appointment, please immediately call the VA Network Telecare Center at the numbers above and reschedule.

Several departments at the MEDVAMC schedule their own appointments. After you have received a consult from your health care provider, these clinics can be reached using the following telephone numbers:

MRI

(713) 794-7808

Substance Dependence

(713) 794-7900

X-Ray

(713) 791-1414, ext. 4516

Spinal Cord Injury Clinic

(713) 794-7057

Trauma Recovery Program

(713) 794-8700

Geropsychiatry

(713) 794-8709

Pacemaker

(713) 794-7300

Cardiology

(713) 794-7300

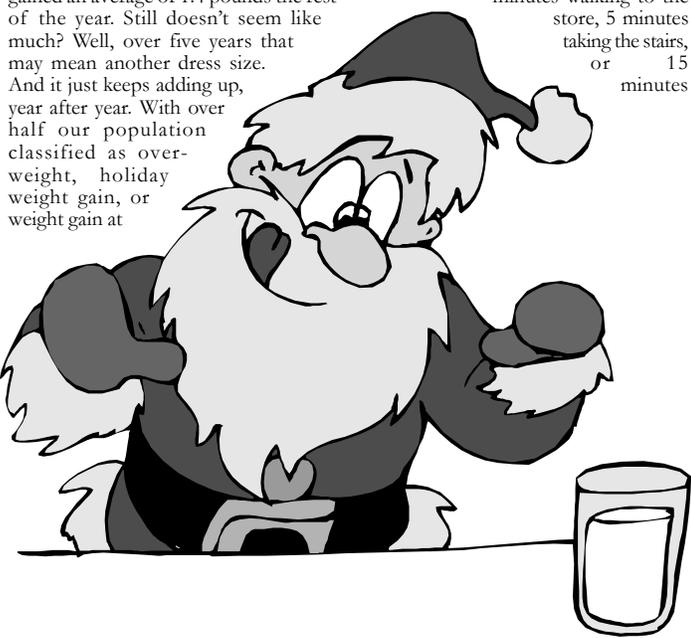
Urology Clinic

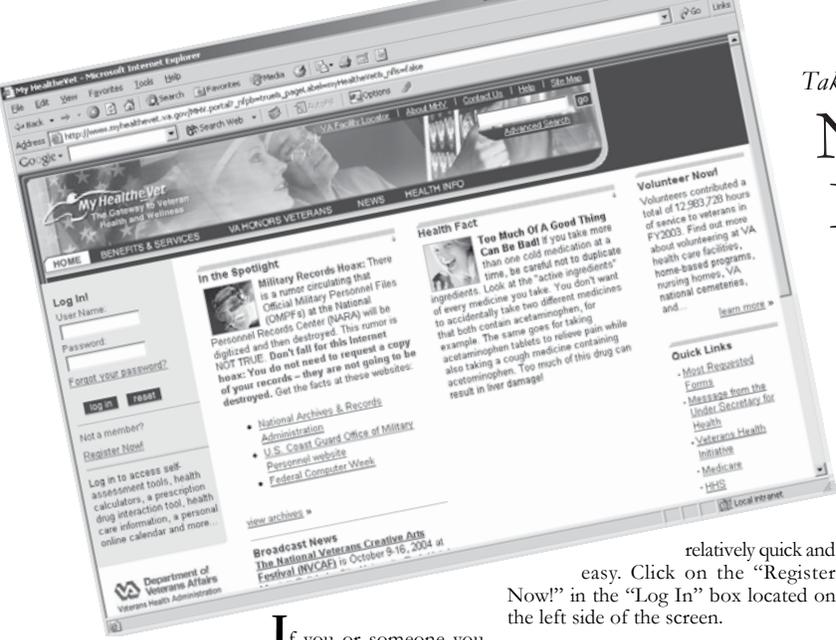
(713) 791-1414, ext. 6424

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Take a minute and visit www.myhealthvet.va.gov . . .

New Health Care Web Site Especially for Veterans

available from VA and other Federal sources.

Register for a **My HealthVet** account to gain full access to all the features, including the 18 million pages of health information from the site's Health Education Library. And if you are a TriCare Online registrant, you can get directly there from your **My HealthVet** Health Info tab.

In the future:

Many future enhancements are being developed for **My HealthVet**. You will be able to refill your VA prescriptions on-line, view your co-pay balances and appointments, and enter certain information such as your blood pressure, temperature, or other measurements that would be helpful to your physician. All this will be available to you by Spring 2005.

In 2005, you will be able to receive copies of your VA health information online. All your personal data will be secure and private in your own eVault protected by a special security system. And you will be able to share your online information with anyone you designate.

Today's VA health care is really a strategic partnership between patients and providers. **My HealthVet** is a powerful tool to help you better understand and manage your health. It is a powerful tool for sharing information with your family, with your caregivers, with anyone you choose. **My HealthVet** puts you at the center of your VA care.

If you have questions about the new **My HealthVet** Web site, contact the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center Library at (713) 794-7856 or stop by Room 4A-400 on the 4th Floor of the MEDVAMC.

If you aren't sure about the Internet or computers in general, the MEDVAMC Library offers free, introductory computer classes for our veterans. All training is one-on-one and provides hands-on assistance from a member of the library staff. During each 30-minute session, you will learn how to navigate the Internet, establish an e-mail account, search for reliable health care information, and to use Internet search engines.

Classes are by appointment only. Call (713) 794-7856 to schedule your training today. ♦

If you or someone you knows has access to the Internet, the Department of Veterans Affairs has a new health care tool for you.

My HealthVet is the name of a Web site created for you, the veteran and your family, and for VA employees. This new health portal will enable you to access health information, tools, and services anywhere in the world you can access the Internet.

Take a minute and visit www.myhealthvet.va.gov. Registration is

relatively quick and easy. Click on the "Register Now!" in the "Log In" box located on the left side of the screen.

Available now:

My HealthVet was launched on Veterans Day, November 11, 2003. It provides one-stop shopping for VA benefits, health care information, special programs, and services.

Now you can view health information developed especially for veterans; use a prescription checker, health calculators and self-assessment tools; access a health education library; and link easily to benefits and resources

Homeless Veteran Program

(continued from page 1)

chronically mentally ill veterans with no income at Midtown Terrace Suites and the DeGeorge at Union Station.

"This is wonderful news because we will now be able to provide specialized care to more homeless veterans in the Houston area," said George Castillo, director of the Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Program at the MEDVAMC.

The DeGeorge Project is a supportive housing project for homeless veterans made possible through cooperative efforts from The Housing Corporation of Greater Houston, the United States Veterans Initiative, Inc, the VA Health Care for Homeless Veteran's Program, and the VA's Homeless Grant and Per Diem Program.

The DeGeorge provides services ranging from accessing health care, employment assistance, transitional housing guidance, and outreach to homeless veterans.

Midtown Terrace Suites, run by the United States Veterans Initiative, Inc., currently provides low-income housing for veterans in need, and will also soon provide the same range of services as the DeGeorge Project.

The DeGeorge at Union Station is located at 1418 Preston Avenue, one block from Enron Field at the corner of Preston and La Branch. The telephone number is (713) 794-7533 and the office is open 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday to Friday. Midtown Terrace Suites is located at 4640 Main Street.

The HCHV Program at the MEDVAMC offers a wide array of special programs and initiatives specifically designed to help homeless veterans live as self-sufficiently and

independently as possible. Homeless veterans are assisted in regaining housing and employment through case management.

HCHV staff seek out homeless veterans in the community, evaluate their physical and mental health care needs, and link them with VA and community services. The program gives special emphasis to the needs of the homeless, chronically mentally ill and provides supportive housing options for eligible homeless veterans.

HCHV provides supportive housing services to eligible homeless veterans with chronic psychiatric conditions, HIV, or chronic substance use disorders. The goals of these services are to reduce homelessness and improve the veterans' quality of life.

Some of the services provided by the HCHV include assessment of eligibility and need for housing assistance and support services; help in getting permanent housing through HUD Section 8 vouchers or certificates, Public Housing Authority, project-based subsidized housing, tenant-based rental assistance, Harris County Community Development Agency, private landlords, or HUD rural initiative; intensive case management; group and individual counseling; occupational and recreational therapy; supportive drug and alcohol counseling; vocational counseling; help in getting furnishings and other household items; and continued support after rental assistance ends.

For more information on available services for homeless veterans, please call (713) 558-2280 or visit the MEDVAMC Web site at www.bouston.med.va.gov. The HCHV office is located on the 6th Floor of the MEDVAMC, 2002 Holcombe Blvd, telephone (713) 794-7848. ♦

STOP DISEASE IN ITS TRACKS!



IT JUST TAKES SECONDS!

CLEAN YOUR HANDS!

WHEN:

- ✓ Before eating
- ✓ After using restroom
- ✓ After coughing or sneezing
- ✓ After being near someone sick, coughing, or sneezing
- ✓ After touching trash

HOW:

- ✓ Rub alcohol-based hand cleaner vigorously over all parts of hands for 30 seconds

OR

- ✓ Use antimicrobial soap and water then lather over hands
- ✓ Rub hands vigorously for 15 seconds
- ✓ Rinse and dry well
- ✓ Turn off tap water with paper towel

WHY:

- ✓ Prevent flu, colds, and diarrhea
- ✓ Stay healthy
- ✓ Prevent spread of other sicknesses and diseases

Flu Vaccine Available for Veterans in Need at Houston VA

(continued from page 1)

This year, the MEDVAMC, including the Beaumont and Lufkin Outpatient Clinics, will follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Interim Influenza Vaccination Recommendations and the VA Influenza Vaccine Advisories issued by the Under Secretary for Health.

These recommendations and advisories will allow MEDVAMC medical staff to fairly and consistently provide the vaccine to those patients and staff with the greatest need.

The MEDVAMC plan ensures those at greatest risk, the elderly and high-risk patients, receive a flu shot. Flu vaccination will be offered to veterans in Influenza Patient Groups 1 and 2.

Influenza Patient Group 1 includes inpatients in the Transitional Care Center, Gero-Psychiatric Unit, and Spinal Cord Injury Unit.

Influenza Patient Group 2 includes inpatients/outpatients who are 65 years of age and older. Group 2 also includes inpatients/outpatients less than 65 years of age with chronic lung disorders including asthma, chronic heart disorders, chronic metabolic diseases including diabetes, chronic kidney disorders, chronic blood disorders including Sickle-cell anemia, weakened immune system including HIV/AIDS, and pregnancy. Finally, Group 2 includes

veterans with out-of-home caregivers or household contacts with children less than 6 months of age.

Vaccinations of veterans in Influenza Patient Groups 1 and 2 will be given at scheduled appointments. If veterans drop-in for vaccinations and there is more than a 30 minute wait, those patients will be given an appointment time to return for their vaccination. No vaccinations will be given to veterans in the Emergency Room or in the Triage area.

At the MEDVAMC, we take very seriously the CDC recommendation that all health care providers who work with people at high risk of flu and its complications get flu shots.

At this time, flu vaccine will be offered to MEDVAMC staff in Influenza Staff Groups 1 and 2.

Influenza Staff Group 1 includes health care workers or staff with direct, hands-on, face-to-face patient care responsibilities in the Transitional Care Center, inpatient Gero-Psychiatric unit, and Spinal Cord Injury Units.

Influenza Staff Group 2 includes health care workers or staff with direct, hands-on, face-to-face patient care responsibilities in the Emergency Room, intensive care units, ambulatory chemotherapy unit, inpatient medical/surgical nursing units, and outpatient clinics where staff are delivering hands-on (i.e. touching or examining patients) care. As examples, this would include

physicians, nursing staff, respiratory therapists, phlebotomists, imaging technologists, and physical therapists in these areas. This group also includes Employee Health staff.

Whether vaccinated or not, it is important for veterans, family members, and MEDVAMC staff to be informed of medical treatments that can lessen the severity of a flu illness and public health measures that can help prevent acquiring this infection.

It is a good idea to avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others. If you get the flu, stay home from work. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Wash your hands with soap/water or alcohol-based hand rubs, especially after coughing or sneezing. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth to prevent germ transmission. Consult your physician if you contract influenza as antiviral therapy may offer some relief.

Remember there are no cases of flu reported in the Houston area at this time. And it appears the MEDVAMC will have sufficient vaccine to take care of our veterans. If you have questions about flu shots, please consult with your primary care provider or contact Charles Wright, Ph.D., MEDVAMC Preventive Medicine Coordinator at (713) 794-8768. ♦ James W. Scheerich, M.D., MEDVAMC Deputy Chief of Staff

34 Houston VA Docs Listed as Top in Houston

HOUSTON - *H Texas* magazine's September 2004 issue includes 34 Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) physicians (27 staff physicians and 7 consultants) on their list of best doctors in Houston.

This annual special section is devoted to the best health care providers serving the greater Houston metropolitan area. The doctors listed in this issue of *H Texas* were the top vote getters chosen by their peers and the community at large. Ballots for nomination were made available by fax and via the internet at www.htexas.com.

For the names of the MEDVAMC physicians listed, visit www.houston.med.va.gov and click on the "In the News" Press Releases icon.

Houston is home to some of the best doctors and medical facilities in the world, and quite a few of those physicians work right here at the MEDVAMC. For a complete list of the best doctors in Houston according to *H Texas* magazine, visit their Web site at www.htexas.com. ♦ portions of this article are courtesy 'H Texas' magazine

This is the 6th year the MEDVAMC has held this important free screening clinic for Peripheral Vascular Disease . . .

'Legs For Life' Campaign Walks into Houston VA

HOUSTON, TX - The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) held its 6th Annual "Legs For Life Campaign" in October. This important free screening clinic for Peripheral Vascular Disease (PVD) is organized by the Operative Care Line and this year, was held in the 5th Floor-Preoperative Screening Clinic. The goal of the event is to teach veterans, their families, and friends how to recognize early symptoms of this disease.

PVD is a common circulation problem in which the arteries that carry blood to the legs or arms become narrowed or clogged. PVD is sometimes called peripheral arterial disease. PVD interferes with the normal flow of blood, sometimes causing pain, but often causing no symptoms at all.

The most common cause of PVD is atherosclerosis (often called hardening of the arteries). Atherosclerosis is a gradual process in which cholesterol and scar tissue build up, forming a substance called "plaque" that clogs the blood vessels. In some cases, PVD may be caused by blood clots that lodge in the arteries and restrict blood flow.

PVD affects about one in 20 people over the age of 50 in the U.S. More than half the people with PVD experience leg pain, numbness, or other symptoms, but many people dismiss these signs as "a normal part of aging" and don't seek medical help. Only about half of those with symptoms have been diagnosed with PVD and are seeing a doctor.

The most common symptom of PVD is painful cramping in the leg or hip, particularly when walking. This symptom, also known as "claudication," occurs when there is not enough blood flowing to the leg muscles during exercise. The pain typically goes away when the muscles are given a rest.

Other symptoms may include numbness, tingling, or weakness in the leg. In severe cases, you may experience a burning or aching pain in your foot or toes while resting, or develop a sore on your leg or foot that does not heal.

People with PVD also may experience a cooling or color change in the skin of the legs or feet, or loss of hair on the legs. In extreme cases, untreated PVD can lead to gangrene, a serious condition that may require amputation of a leg, foot, or toes. If you have PVD, you are also at higher risk for heart disease and stroke.

Unfortunately, the disease often goes undiagnosed because many people do not experience symptoms in the early stages of PVD or they mistakenly think the symptoms are a normal part of aging. As many as 8 million people in the U.S. may have PVD. The disease affects everyone, although men are somewhat more likely than women to have PVD.

Those who are at highest risk are over the age of 50, smokers, diabetic, overweight, people who do not exercise, or people who have high blood pressure or high cholesterol. A family history of heart or vascular disease may also put



May Gurrula, RN, staff nurse in the Pre-Operative Screening Clinic examines veteran Leroy Thomas for Peripheral Vascular Disease (PVD). PVD is a common circulation problem in which the arteries that carry blood to the legs or arms become narrowed or clogged. PVD affects about one in 20 people over the age of 50 in the United States. More than half the people with PVD experience leg pain, numbness, or other symptoms, but many people dismiss these signs as "a normal part of aging" and don't seek medical help.

you at higher risk for PVD.

The screening process for PVD is quite simple. Your MEDVAMC health care provider will take your pulse in various parts of your legs. If the pulses in your legs are absent or severely decreased, an Ankle Brachial Index will

be performed next.

If you have questions about PVD, ask your MEDVAMC Prime Care Provider or call the VA Network Telecare Center at (713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1 (800) 639-5137. ♦ portions courtesy Society of Interventional Radiology at www.sirweb.org



From our Veterans

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

Question: I got an e-mail saying that the National Archives is destroying all its paper records for military members. Is this true?

Answer: No. Unfortunately, there are scam messages circulating on the Internet telling veterans that the National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA) National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis plans to digitally scan its military personnel records and destroy the paper files unless veterans request the originals be sent to them.

NARA officials say this is false and that the Personnel Records Center does not intend to destroy its paper files. Any scanning will be performed to reduce the need for handling fragile records during the reference process. Officials stressed that it is the center's responsibility to preserve and protect official military personnel files, as they are permanently valuable records documenting the essential evidence of military service for the nation's veterans.

To obtain a copy of your military personnel record, visit the National Archives and Records Administration on

the Web at www.archives.gov or call 1-866-272-6272. The VA Regional Office, at 1-800-827-1000, can also send you the necessary request form.

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

Answer: Send an email to bobbi.gruner@med.va.gov to sign up to receive news releases and information. You can also visit www.houston.med.va.gov and click on the "In the News" symbol.

Question: I heard the U.S. government, including the VA, has single family homes to buy. Is this true?

Answer: The www.HomeSales.gov Web site provides current information about single family homes for sale by the U.S. Federal Government. These previously owned homes are for sale by public auction or other method depending on the property. Anyone can buy a home for sale by the U.S. Government, but you must work with a real estate agent,

broker, or servicing representative to submit an offer or bid.

Question: I am interested in working for the VA. Where can I find out about jobs?

Answer: Over 235,000 people, 13 percent of the federal work force, are employed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Their skills range from doctors and nurses, personnel specialists and payroll workers, to cemetery maintenance specialists and experts in rating disabilities.

The VA has information about employment opportunities, benefits, and how to apply for a job at its Web site www.va.gov/jobs.

Question: Can I apply for Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance on the Internet?

Answer: VA's Web site already provides online convenience for applications for compensation, pension, health care, and vocational rehabilitation benefits as well as education enrollment certification. Recently, Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance (S-DVI) was added and this means veterans can be assured their application is transmitted to the VA Insurance Center in Philadelphia without mailing delay.

The application can be accessed through the online applications link at VA's main Web page at www.va.gov or through the insurance Web pages at www.insurance.va.gov.

Question: Am I eligible for a nursing home?

Answer: If you are a veteran requiring nursing home care for a service-connected condition, a veteran rated at least 60% and also rated 40% unemployable, or a veteran rated 70% or more, you have mandatory eligibility.

All other veterans are eligible for nursing home placement on a resource and space-available basis.

For information, call the MEDVAMC Extended Care Line's Community Nursing Home Program at (713) 794-7149.

Question: I heard that the VA expanded benefits for Ex-POWs. Where can I find out more?

Answer: The VA has expanded benefits for all former POWs with strokes and common heart diseases. These veterans will be automatically eligible for disability compensation for those common ailments, and their spouses and dependents will be eligible for service-connected survivors' benefits if these diseases contribute to the death of a former POW.

This new decision will add to the list of 16 medical problems that VA presumes to be linked to the military service of former POWs.

For more information, contact the VA Regional Office at (713) 794-3678 or toll free 1-800-827-1000.

Question: Are women veterans eligible for unique VA health benefits?

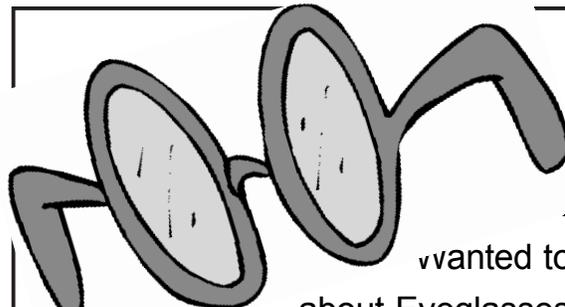
Answer: Women veterans are eligible for the same Medical Benefit Package as all veterans. Any inpatient care or treatment required which is not available at the MEDVAMC will be obtained through other facilities or through community health care facilities.

Question: Can I get a prescription by a non-VA physician filled at a VA health care facility?

Answer: Only veterans with special eligibility, such as veterans in receipt of a VA pension with aid and attendance benefits, are eligible to obtain expense.

Important VA Telephone Numbers

| | |
|--|---|
| Michael E. DeBakey 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 |



... You
wanted to Know
about Eyeglasses at the
Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center!

Veterans, eligible for eyeglasses, will be provided one pair. If a veteran is unable to wear bifocals, an exception is made and that veteran will receive one pair of up-close eyeglasses and one pair of far-away eyeglasses. Duplicate pairs will not be provided yearly.

Replacement pairs will be provided when circumstances warrant. For example, if you break your eyeglasses, lose them, or have a change in prescription. Replacements cannot be provided if the original prescription is more than one year old.

Vanity lenses, tints, and progressives cannot be provided at VA expense. Your MEDVAMC eye doctor will determine which type of eyeglasses you need. Safety lenses will only be provided to veterans who have lost their complete vision in one eye.

For more information, read VHA Directive 2002-039
on the VA Web site at
<http://www.va.gov/publ/direc/health/direct/12002039.pdf>