



VA Pride

Vol. 5 No. 2 An Information Guide for the Veterans We Serve in Southeast Texas March/April 2006

Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic • Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic, Lufkin • Galveston VA Outpatient Clinic
New Orleans Houston-based VA Outpatient Clinic • Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic

Houston VA Receives Praise for Two Mental Health Programs

HOUSTON – The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) was notified in December that it was awarded three-year CARF accreditations for its Mental Health Care Line's Vocational Rehabilitation and Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Programs.

The Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) is a private, not-for-profit organization that grew out of a need in the medical and vocational rehabilitation fields to promote quality programs for people with disabilities and others in need of services. CARF is committed to developing and maintaining practical, customer-focused standards to help organizations measure and improve the quality, value, and optimal outcomes in the lives of the persons they serve. A three-year accreditation is the highest level of accreditation an organization may be awarded.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program at the MEDVAMC is committed to assisting veterans with psychiatric or physical disabilities reach their highest level of vocational productivity. The goals of the program include providing structured vocational evaluations; improving pre-vocational skills such as adhering to a work schedule, working cooperatively with others, and accepting supervision; reducing psychiatric and physical symptoms; preventing relapse and/or hospitalization; improving self-esteem; enhancing quality of life; and returning veterans to competitive employment. In the survey summary, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program had no recommendations and four exemplary commendations.

The HCHV Program at the MEDVAMC is committed to assisting homeless veterans with chronic mental illnesses reach their highest level of

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Veterans are assigned an employment specialist who dedicates one-on-one time in the pursuit of employment . . .

Houston VA Spearheads Initiative to Boost Employment for Disabled Veterans

HOUSTON - The Department of Veterans Affairs has offered employment assistance and guidance to veterans for many years. Currently, more than 7,000 veterans participate in VA Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) programs nationwide each year.

Last year, the Substance Dependence and Vocational Rehabilitation Program at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) received funding to serve as a mentor site for a new initiative focusing on veterans with severe mental illnesses. The Supported Employment Program is designed primarily to help disabled veterans find and maintain competitive employment. This new model for vocational rehabilitation avoids lengthy pre-vocational assessments and shelter-type work experiences in favor of directly placing and supporting veterans in community-based jobs tailored to their individual preferences, needs, and strengths.

"Employment is an integral part of the recovery process. It is considered

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One veteran who believes the Supported Employment Program has worked for him is Parnell Carpenter. "What the Supported Employment Program did for me in four months was reestablish my independence and gave me my dreams back," said Carpenter, above right, discussing job opportunities with his employment specialist, Joseph Edwards.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's recent stroke is thought to have been caused by a Patent Foramen Ovale . . .

Houston VA Using Innovative Procedure to Repair Heart Defect

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC) is among the first VA hospitals in the country to close a Patent Foramen Ovale (PFO) using a catheter-based procedure.

A PFO is a defect in the septum (wall) between the two upper chambers of the heart. Specifically, the defect is an incomplete closure that results in the creation of a flap or a valve-like opening. A PFO is frequent in everyone before birth, but seals shut in about 80 percent of all people.

When a person with this defect creates pressure inside his or her chest such as when coughing or sneezing, the flap can open. Blood can then flow in either direction directly between the right and left atrium of the heart. When blood travels directly from the one part of the heart to another, it bypasses the filtering system of the lungs. If debris is present in the blood, such as small blood clots, it can pass through the left atrium and lodge in the brain causing a stroke or

embed in another organ such as the heart, eyes, or kidneys.

"The usual treatment course for patients with this serious heart defect is the use of blood-thinning drugs. However, many times a patient's condition will deteriorate to a point that more dramatic intervention is necessary. Traditionally, open heart surgery was the only alternative. This new catheter-based procedure for a PFO typically takes about an hour to perform. The patient experiences significantly less pain and discomfort following the procedure. Most of our patients are able to go home the next day," said Biswajit Kar, M.D., MEDVAMC Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory director.

Catheter-based procedures are commonly used to diagnose and treat heart-related problems. For example, catheter-based procedures are used to diagnose and treat clogged arteries and heart attacks. In this new procedure, a

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Special Event:
American Ex-POW Day
Program
April 7, 2006, 10 a.m.
MEDVAMC
4th Floor Auditorium
(713) 794-7349

Surgical Liaison: A Vital Link between Patient, Family, and Surgeon in the Operating and Recovery Rooms

HOUSTON — A warm, friendly face greets patients and family members in the Surgical Ambulatory Care Center (SACC) each morning at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC). Ron Walker, the MEDVAMC surgical liaison, is the direct link between family members and the operating room.

Staff members at the MEDVAMC believe collaboration and good communication enhance patient satisfaction and quality of care.

“Keeping family members informed about the status of their loved one while they are in surgery greatly relieves their anxiety,” said Beverly Green-Rashad, RN, Operative Care Line nurse executive. “It is also comforting to the veteran to know that someone is taking care of their family member.”

Walker is the link between the family, surgeon, and the recovery room. He checks the Operating Room (OR) schedule each morning and proceeds to the SACC where he introduces himself and asks if those having surgery have a family member or significant other present.

Once he knows who has a loved one with them, he tells them how he can assist them throughout the surgical process. Walker establishes a rapport with the family early on, so it is easier to interact with them at any point in the process.

Family members are very grateful to have someone personally escort them to the appropriate waiting room where the

surgeon will meet with them following surgery. “The liaison has given me such a sense of relief just by keeping me informed throughout the day,” said one family member.

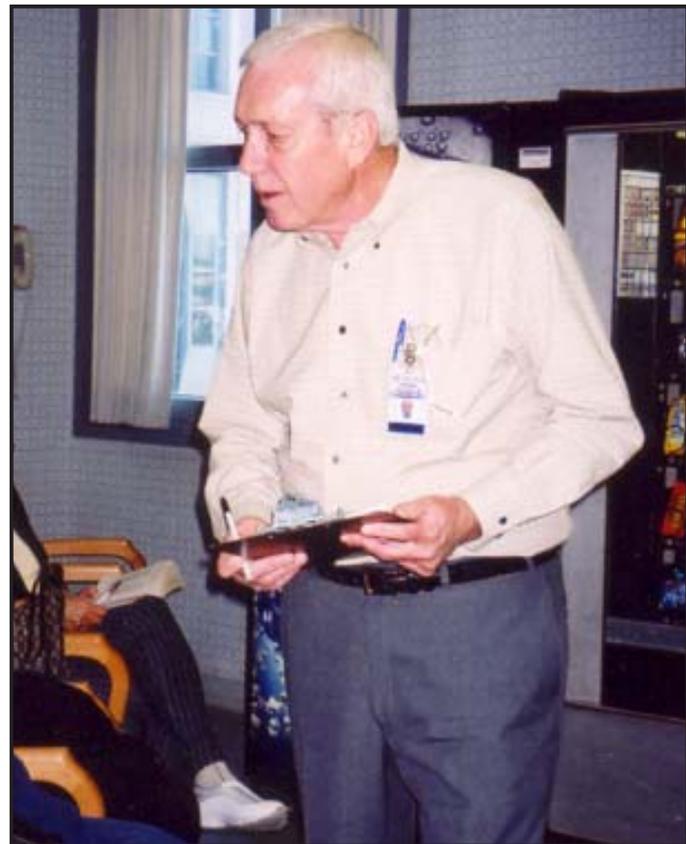
Walker routinely checks on the status of a patient by calling directly into the OR and keeps the family informed about the length of surgery. He also finds out if everything is going well and when the patient is expected to go to the recovery room.

“Just to know what’s going on and that their loved one is well is a great stress reducer for the family,” said Walker.

The caring does not stop there. Once the patient is settled in the recovery room, Walker accompanies the family member for a brief visit. Surgeons sometimes face situations where other patients require immediate attention and do not have time to talk with families between cases, so the liaison provides that consistency.

“Having a surgical liaison has allowed the nursing staff to stay focused on patient care in this very busy area,” said Mary Chatman, RN, Post Anesthesia Care Unit nurse manager. “Nurses now do not have to leave the clinical area to locate the family thus giving them more time for patients. If the surgeon has not spoken with the family, the liaison informs the surgeon about the patient’s family.”

“This is definitely the best job I’ve ever had,” said Walker. “It is very rewarding to be able to help veterans and their families during a stressful time. I



Above, Ron Walker, the MEDVAMC surgical liaison, meets with family members to update them on their loved one’s progress in surgery. Walker routinely checks on the status of a patient by calling directly into the OR and keeps the family informed about the length of surgery. He also finds out if everything is going well and when the patient is expected to go to the recovery room.

receive many hugs of appreciation from wives and mothers,” said Walker.

The feedback received from both staff and family members is very supportive and appreciative of the concept.

“At the Michael E. DeBakey VA

Medical Center, we are constantly striving to improve patient satisfaction and communication among caregivers, family members, and the patient,” said Green-Rashad. “The surgical liaison is definitely a step in the right direction.”

Fran Burke, Public Affairs Specialist

A Word from the Director . . .

VA’s National Golden Age Games Coming in 2007

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) has been selected to host the Department of Veterans Affairs’ National Golden Age Games in 2007. These games bring together veterans age 55 and older who receive health care at VA medical facilities across the country to compete in events such as swimming, bicycling, golf, shot put, discus, 10-meter air rifle, table tennis, dominoes, shuffleboard, horseshoes, nine-ball, bowling, checkers, and croquet. We are delighted to have been selected to host the games and look forward to providing a wonderful experience for the competitors.

Sports and fitness are vital ingredients of VA’s four National Rehabilitation Special Events. The other events are the National Wheelchair Games, the Winter Sports Clinic, and the Creative Arts Festival. Each one showcases different events and activities allowing veterans to demonstrate their skills, competitiveness, and spirit, much as the Winter Olympic athletes this past month. These sports and leisure activities

provide our veterans unique environments for self-development, camaraderie, and a well-earned sense of accomplishment.

The Golden Age Games is an outgrowth of VA’s historic involvement in geriatric programs. Many of the events began as recreational activities at VA hospitals and nursing home care units across the country. In 1985, the first Golden Age Games took place in Albany, Georgia, with 115 competitors.

Physical activity, friendly competition, and recreation engage the mind as well as the body and can contribute significantly to an improved quality of life. VA research and clinical experience verify that physical activity is particularly important to the health, recovery, and well-being of older people. All of the National Rehabilitation Special Events provide disabled and elderly veterans with challenging opportunities to accomplish feats many may have believed were no longer available to them because of their disabilities or their age.

MEDVAMC Employee Wellness



Edgar L. Tucker, Medical Center Director

Coordinator Michael Mitchell has been selected to coordinate the 2007 games. Mr. Mitchell is already forming teams of staff and volunteers committed to making these games the best ever. To support the more than 500 athletes expected to compete in this week-long event, hundreds of volunteers are needed to assist with everything from setting up venues to hosting evening entertainment for our guests. If you would like more information about volunteering, call Mr. Mitchell at (713) 794-8779. ♦

Veteran Health Fair: “Step Up to Nutrition and Health”

When: Thursday, March 23, 2006, noon - 4 p.m.

Where: 6th Floor Conference Room 6B-184, Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center

Audience: All veterans and family members are invited.

What: MEDVAMC dietitians and interns will be available to provide guidance and practical advice and to answer questions.

More Info: Caroline Nelson, MS, RD, (713) 791-1414, ext. 5290

The frequency and unique nature of the blast injuries suffered by military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan create the need for a unique interdisciplinary polytrauma rehabilitation program to handle the ongoing rehabilitative, psychological, medical, and prosthetic needs of these individuals.

Houston VA's New Level II Polytrauma Rehabilitation Program: Rebuilding Injured Lives

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

Blast-related injuries are often "polytraumatic," meaning they result in injury and/or impairment to more than one body system or organ, and often require specialized intensive rehabilitation processes and coordination of care across the full continuum. Of these injured military personnel, about 60 percent have some degree of traumatic brain injury. The frequency and unique nature of these blast injuries create the need for a unique interdisciplinary polytrauma rehabilitation program to handle the ongoing rehabilitative, psychological, medical, and prosthetic needs of these individuals.

Last August, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) added an extremely important and timely program to its array of available health care services, a Level II Polytrauma Program.

One of 21 new Polytrauma Network Sites across the country, the program at the MEDVAMC provides both inpatient and outpatient services using an interdisciplinary team consisting of specialty physicians, rehabilitation therapists, audiologists, speech pathologists, neuropsychologists, blind rehabilitation specialists, prosthetists, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and other disciplines, with access to the full range of medical and support services within the medical center to meet a patient's needs. Specialized rehabilitation programs are provided for traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, blind rehabilitation, and treatment for post traumatic stress disorder.

The goals of the MEDVAMC Polytrauma Program are to provide post-acute medical assessment to patients injured by blasts or accidents; provide medical, rehabilitation, and psychological treatment services; coordinate care as

patients move from acute hospitalization through rehabilitation and ultimately back to the home and community; provide case management and family support through all phases of treatment; monitor short and long-term outcomes for these individuals; and continue a program of research to better understand the effectiveness of treatments for traumatic brain injuries, spinal cord disabilities, and post traumatic stress disorders.

Key components of the Polytrauma Program are MEDVAMC's Orthotics and Prosthetics Program accredited by the American Board for Certification and the Comprehensive Integrated Inpatient Rehabilitation Program, Vocational Rehabilitation Program, and Spinal Cord Injury Programs, all fully accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities.

"Our goals here are to coordinate care as patients move from acute hospitalization through rehabilitation and ultimately back to their home and community, and to also monitor short and long-term outcomes for these individuals. It is extremely important for each patient to receive in-depth and consistent case management and family support through all phases of treatment," said Helene K. Henson, M.D., Rehabilitation Care Line executive with clinical and administrative responsibility for implementing the Polytrauma Rehabilitation Program at the MEDVAMC.

Combat or post-deployment stress management and mental health services are provided as needed. Patients initially receive a comprehensive evaluation by a mental health practitioner. This evaluation includes self-reported medical history and current complaints, followed by a comprehensive physical examination from a physiatrist (a physician specializing in physical medicine and rehabilitation). Findings from these initial assessments trigger appropriate treatments and/or referrals to other specialists in the areas of brain injury evaluation and treatment, amputation management and prosthetics, visual and hearing impairment, and emotional adjustment and/or stress management.

A common finding from the polytrauma evaluations is the identification of previously unrecognized injuries or impairments that have ongoing adverse functional effects. What doctors call "closed-head injuries," from blows to the head or blasts, are more



A key component of the new Polytrauma Program is the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center's Orthotics and Prosthetics Program accredited by the American Board for Certification. Above, Gerald Blackburn, MEDVAMC prosthetist, and Helene K. Henson, M.D., Rehabilitation Care Line executive, discuss a patient's prosthetic device.

likely to have diffuse effects throughout the brain, particularly on the frontal lobes, which control the ability to pay attention, make plans, manage time, and solve problems.

"I believe the majority of veterans who return to our level of care will require treatment with an emphasis on cognitive assessments and interventions. We are working with the Mental Health Care Line to produce educational materials for our prime care providers to help identify veterans with hidden brain injury. My biggest concern is those patients with mild to moderate head injuries that may not be visible. These individuals are able to walk and talk, but their memory is not good, they lose their temper, they have personality changes, and they get into trouble with the law. We want to be sure these patients receive appropriate medical attention," said Henson, who is listed as one of the best doctors in the nation in the field of physical medicine and rehabilitation by the medical knowledge company, Best Doctors, Inc.

The VA Polytrauma Sites will coordinate the transfer and provision of health care for polytrauma patients within the VA and between VA and the Department of Defense to ensure timely access to veteran health care benefits. In addition to medical rehabilitation services and psychosocial support for both patient and family, the sites offer

education and training to prepare patients and families for success after going home.

"This Polytrauma Program reflects VA's commitment to care for the men and women who have served in uniform. A reality of combat is that some return with loss of limbs, traumatic brain injuries, and other severe injuries. The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center recognized that it must provide specialized and long-term care for military service members and veterans who sustained multiple and severe injuries," said Thomas A. Kent, M.D., Neurology Care Line executive and a supporting member of the Polytrauma Program.

The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center is one of the largest and most complex medical centers in the Department of Veterans Affairs. Awarded Magnet Recognition for Excellence in Nursing Services in 2004 and the Robert W. Carey Organizational Excellence Award in 2005, the MEDVAMC serves as the primary health care provider for more than 112,000 veterans in southeast Texas.

Veterans from around the country are referred to the MEDVAMC in Houston for specialized diagnostic care, surgery, and medical treatment including cardiovascular surgery, ophthalmology, nuclear medicine, and treatment of spinal cord injury and diseases. ♦

Notice to Veteran Patients

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is pleased you have selected us to provide your health care. We want to improve your health and well-being. We will make your visit or stay as pleasant for you as possible. As part of our service to you, to other veterans and to the nation, we are committed to improving health care quality. We also train future health care professionals, conduct research, and support our country in times of national emergency. In all of these activities, our employees will respect and support your rights as a patient.

Houston VA Receives Praise for Its Vocational Rehabilitation and Health Care for Homeless Veterans Programs

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

In the CARF survey, the HCHV Program also had no recommendations and an astounding 14 exemplary commendations, a number seldom awarded to a rehabilitation program.

MEDVAMC was recognized for strengths in many areas. One surveyor indicated that in his 13 years of performing CARF surveys, he had never given so many exemplary commendations nor had he ever rated an entire section as high as he did with MEDVAMC's Case Management/Service Coordination.

"I would also like to point out that the team members of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center's Vocational Rehabilitation and Health Care for Homeless Veterans Programs were recognized for their dedication and commitment to the rehabilitation process and to their patients," said Joseph Hamilton, M.D., Mental Health Care Line executive.

The survey team commented that patients and family members consistently expressed positive comments and their heartfelt responses exemplified the genuine interest the MEDVAMC staff members had in the overall well-being and quality of life of their patients.

"I am very proud the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center has received such important recognition," said Thomas B. Horvath, M.D., F.R.A.C.P., MEDVAMC chief of staff. "The staff members of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program are top-notch. I am pleased we serve as such a positive example for other hospitals." ♦

Houston VA Repairs Life-Threatening Heart Defects with New Procedure



From left, Biswajit Kar, M.D., director of the Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center studies a patient monitor during a catheterization procedure with Baylor College of Medicine fellows Rajnikant Patel, M.D. and Sasidhar Gutbikonda, M.D.

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catheter, a long, thin, flexible, hollow tube, is slowly moved into the heart. The catheter is initially inserted into a large vein through a small incision made usually in the inner thigh. A PFO closure device is moved through the catheter into the heart to the location of the heart

wall defect. Once in the correct location, the PFO closure device is allowed to expand its shape to straddle each side of the hole. The device will remain in the heart permanently to stop the abnormal flow of blood between the two chambers of the heart. The catheter is then removed and the procedure is complete.

"PFOs have been quite prominent in the news recently with the case of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who has had two strokes. The first was thought to have been caused by a PFO, and in fact, he was scheduled for the same closure device that Dr. Kar recently implanted. While he was waiting, he had been placed on blood thinners and this is believed to have caused his second stroke. This only emphasizes that the use of blood thinners has its own inherent risks," said Blase Carabello, M.D., MEDVAMC Medical Care Line executive.

"A catheter-based procedure for a patient with a Patent Foramen Ovale has many advantages. It is less risky and has fewer complications compared to surgery and many procedures can be performed without general anesthesia. Most patients can resume normal activities within a few days and the procedure may be combined with other treatment options," said Biykem Bozkurt, M.D., MEDVAMC acting chief of Cardiology.

The materials used in the PFO closure device products have a proven long-term safety history and have been widely used in heart surgery procedures. Within a few days, the body's own tissue begins to grow over the device. By three to six months, the device is completely covered by heart tissue and at that point, becomes a part of the wall of the patient's heart. ♦ Biswajit Kar, M.D., Director, MEDVAMC Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory

Escobar Selected as Associate Director

HOUSTON – Carlos R. Escobar, B.E.D.-Arch, M.H.A. was recently selected as the new associate director for the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC). In his new post, Escobar, who has been with VA since 1985, will serve as the MEDVAMC's chief operating officer charged with day-to-day operations and management of the facility's \$440 million annual budget.

Prior to joining the MEDVAMC, Escobar served as the capital assets manager of the VA Heartland Network in Kansas City, Missouri. He was also a member of several national policy committees including strategic planning, fiscal management, Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services, and women veterans.

"Carlos' experience in strategic planning, budget allocation, and management of capital resources will allow our medical center to continue providing world-class care to veterans in southeast Texas," said Edgar L. Tucker, MEDVAMC director.

From 1996 to 2000, Escobar was plant, property and equipment manager and then capital assets and infrastructure operations director for the VA Heartland Network.

From 1992 to 1996, he held several positions in the VA Office of the Regional Director, Central Region in Ann Arbor, Michigan. These included health care facilities specialist, chief technical support section, and regional

assistant construction manager. Escobar began his VA career as an architect at the VA Medical Center in Temple, Texas.

As a member of the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) Regents Advisory Council, he was recently appointed to the 2006 ACHE Federal Executive Healthcare Excellence Award Judging Committee.

Escobar received a bachelor's degree in Environmental Design - Architecture in 1985 from the University of Puerto Rico in San Juan and a Master of Science in Health Professions in 1990 from Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. He is also a member of the American Society of Health Care Engineers. ♦

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 were recently discharged from the military, 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.

Please contact Fern A. Taylor, Manager, Patient Access Center at (713) 794-7034.

How to Live a Healthy Life with Diabetes

HOUSTON - Diabetes is an illness that affects a large number of people. It occurs when you have too much glucose, or sugar, in your blood. Signs of early diabetes include increased thirst and urination, unexplained weight loss, blurred vision, numbness or tingling in the hands or feet, and/or poor wound healing.

Uncontrolled, diabetes over time can cause poor circulation, infections that can be hard to treat, nerve damage, blindness, kidney damage, and heart disease that can lead to death. If you have diabetes in your family or suspect that you might have symptoms of diabetes, please talk with your VA health care provider about a Blood Glucose Test.

The Blood Glucose Test is a laboratory test that tells exactly how much glucose, or sugar, you have in your blood when it is drawn.

Normal Blood Glucose levels should be between 70 and 110. Another test used to measure the glucose level in the blood is a Glycosylated Hemoglobin Test (HgbA1C). This test is used to check how much glucose has been in your bloodstream over the past two months before the test is done, and is useful to check how well your diabetes has been controlled with treatment.

Diabetic patients are advised to use very good foot care. You, or someone you know, should check your feet every day for any sores or redness. You should



MEDVAMC Diabetes Clinic Chief Jose Garcia, M.D. examines veteran Thomas Mizell for complications of diabetes. Diabetics should take extra care to monitor their eyes, feet, and diet.

report foot problems immediately to your doctor, wear properly fitting shoes, and never go barefoot. Once a year, diabetic patients should also have their VA health care provider check their feet.

Diabetic eye exams should be done by an eye doctor every year and any time you notice your vision getting worse.

Medication such as pills and/or

insulin may be needed to lower your blood glucose level, but the most important treatment for diabetes is a proper diet, adjusted to your body needs and activity level. Talk with your VA health care provider for advice. You may want to call or visit your clinic to speak with a registered dietitian for additional advice. ♦

Disabled Veterans Employment Initiative

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important, not only because of the direct improvements in activity, social contacts, and income but also because work promotes gain in related areas such as self-esteem, illness self-management, community tenure, integration into the community, and quality of life. Research has shown that competitive employment builds confidence, increases coping skills, heightens motivation, and raises self-expectations and, finally, it has been proven to be what people want," said Anthony J. Kerrigan, Ph.D., program coordinator, MEDVAMC Vocational Rehabilitation.

Veterans in this program are assigned to an employment specialist who can dedicate a significant amount of one-on-one time in the pursuit of employment, even if the veteran prefers only a few hours of work per week, and in supporting the worker indefinitely

after the hire.

"As an employment specialist for the Supported Employment program, I provide counseling services, 24-hour emergency services, peer support groups, expedition of VA care, liaison with employers, problem-solving assistance, employment counseling, on-site job coaching, benefits planning, and general assistance. Basically, I am a veteran's partner in finding and keeping a job they want," said Joseph Edwards, MEDVAMC employment specialist and a trainer for the VA's South Central VA Healthcare Network.

The MEDVAMC has four employment specialists on staff trained to seek and locate jobs in the community that match veterans' interests, skills, deficits, and ability to work. These individuals are key in facilitating a veteran's ability to successfully work and live in the community; pinpointing individuals' vocational interests, capacities, needs, and preferences for job

matching; identifying opportunities for veterans in local business community; and creating effective partnerships that integrate mutually supportive services within VA and community.

Almost seven months into this new VA initiative, 40 veterans are participating in the Supported Employment program at the MEDVAMC and ten have jobs. The goal is to have 40 percent of program participants working in the community at any time. One veteran who believes the program has worked for him is Parnell Carpenter, who is in recovery from bipolar disorder.

"When I entered the program, I was homeless, unemployed, dealing with disability-related issues, and thinking of moving back to Chicago. What the Supported Employment program did for me in four months was reestablish my independence and gave me my dreams back. My employment specialist believed in me, and most importantly, he was there to talk to me and see me at anytime. It is not often you can call a government employee or caseworker for all sorts of matters. I truly believe my employment specialist cares about my interests and my achievements. Even after he found me a job, he continues to remain in contact and we talk about the dreams I want to achieve now. With his help, I have found a place to live and most importantly, competitive work. I want to go to school and I believe I can. I know my employment specialist will be there to push me toward my aspirations," said Carpenter.

"We believe this new initiative will further our mission of maintaining and improving the health and well-being of our veterans," said Joseph DeVance Hamilton, M.D., Mental Health Care Line executive. ♦

Veterans' Health Care Outscores Private Sector – Again

WASHINGTON – Veterans continue to be more satisfied with their health care than the average American, according to an annual report on customer satisfaction that compares the VA health care system with private-sector health care.

The ratings came in the annual American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which ranks "customer satisfaction" with various federal programs and private-sector industries.

"Although VA has received many wonderful endorsements recently, the support of our veterans – the people who know us best – is the highest praise," said the Honorable R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

The ACSI, an independent survey of customer satisfaction within both the federal and private sectors, gave VA's inpatient care a rating of 83 on a 100-point scale. That's 10 percentage points higher than the 73 rating achieved for inpatient care by the private-sector health care industry.

VA's rating of 80 for outpatient care was five percentage points higher than the 75 rating for private-sector outpatient care and nine percentage points higher than the average satisfaction rating for all federal services.

The latest findings mark the sixth consecutive year VA's health care system has outperformed the private sector for customer satisfaction.

Since 1994, the ACSI survey has been a national measurement of customer satisfaction with the quality of goods and services in the United States. ACSI produces indices of satisfaction for seven economic sectors, 41 industries, 200 private-sector companies, and two types of local government services.

VA's strong showing came after interviews with veterans who have recently used the Department's services. The report is the product of the National Quality Research Center at the University of Michigan Business School, the CFI group, and the Federal Consulting Group.

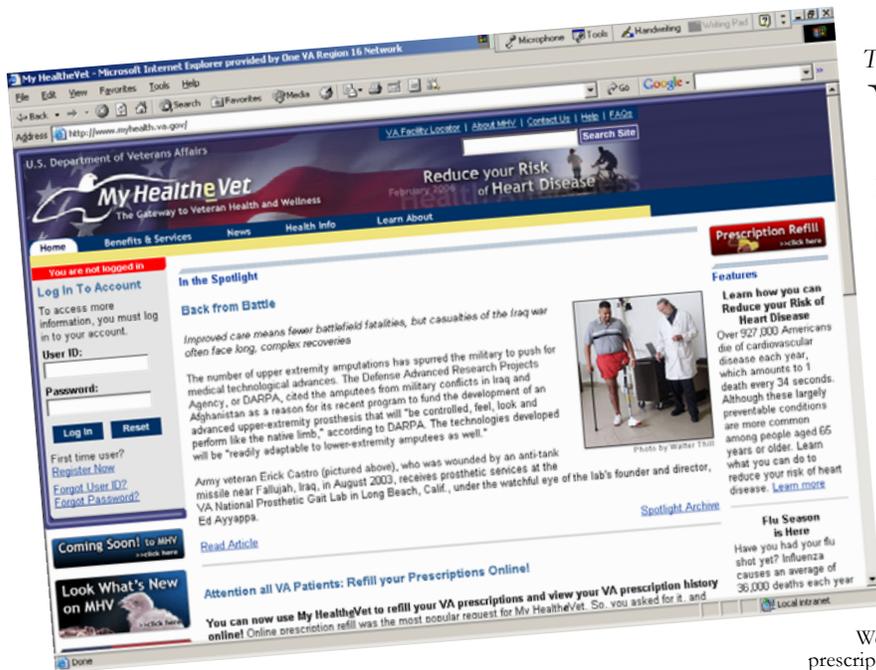
Health care is just one of many potential benefits available to those who served in our nation's armed forces. If you served, or know someone who did, check on eligibility for benefits and services from VA at www.va.gov or 1-800-827-1000. ♦

Do You Suffer from Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)?

HOUSTON - Veterans have often been exposed to significant stress and trauma during their military service. Many veterans have reported a number of health problems during or after their military service that are quite distressing and do not go away. These may include chronic abdominal discomfort or pain accompanied by changes in their stool frequency and form such as diarrhea and constipation. If you have these symptoms, you may have irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

Two treatments that may help relieve the symptoms of IBS are hypnosis and biofeedback. The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and Baylor College of Medicine are conducting a small study of the effect of hypnosis and biofeedback on the symptoms of IBS.

For more information, please call Neil Fiess at (713) 794-7468. ♦



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

Veterans Health Care at Your Fingertips

health information. They can track readings for blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, weight, body temperature, and pain. They can record medical events and treatment locations, and maintain their military health history. VA introduced three new Web-based health trackers—Food Journal, Activity Log, and Pulse Oximetry—on Veterans Day 2005. My HealthVet offers additional electronic services to veterans who receive care at VA medical centers.

able to share all or part of their personal health information with health care providers, inside and outside VA.

All this is possible because VA pioneered the use of computerized medical records in the early 1980s. VA continues to be a leader in the use of computerized medical records and recently received high praise after Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans. Unlike many private-sector hospitals that rely on paper records, all New Orleans VA patient records, prescription information, and laboratory and radiology results are available at any VA medical center and by any VA physician nationwide.

The My HealthVet Web site launched online prescription refill in August 2005 and more than 35,000 online prescription requests were filled nationwide the first month.

My HealthVet will soon provide veterans direct access to their VA electronic health records. Vet Veterans will receive copies of key portions of their electronic VA health record to add to their own personal health record, and will be able to track their outpatient clinic appointments and copay balances. As veterans build their own lifelong health records, they will be

The VA's Computerized Patient Record System certainly paid off during that crisis situation, allowing New Orleans area veterans an opportunity to obtain immediate and uninterrupted quality health care at any VA medical center around the country.

Veterans can access My HealthVet on the Internet at www.myhealth.va.gov and begin keeping a Personal Health Record today. 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. ♦

HOUSTON - Imagine being able to electronically record personal health information and access the latest health information right in your own home. My HealthVet, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) eHealth Web portal, allows veterans to do just that.

On Veterans Day 2003, VA launched this new technology to improve health care for all veterans, independent of where they receive care, by providing

health information and a personal health record via the Web. Veterans can explore reliable information on health topics; research diseases and conditions; learn about combat-related conditions; read about medication and treatment options; and learn how to become and stay healthy.

Today, My HealthVet enables veterans to become full partners in managing their own health. Veterans are now recording and tracking personal

Support Group Listing . . .

Talk with a social worker about available support groups for veterans and family members.

MS Self-Help Group

Meets 2nd Wednesday every month, 2 - 3:30 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Dining Room. Facilitators: Lisa Whipple, (713) 794-7951 & Fe Runtanilla, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4559

Parkinson's Disease Education/Support Group

Meets 1st Friday every month, 10 a.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Dining Room. No meetings in April or September. Facilitators: Naomi Nelson, (713) 794-8938 & Lisa Whipple, (713) 794-7951

Cancer Support Group

Meets 1st Tuesday every month, 1-2 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 4D Dayroom. Facilitators: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, (713) 791-1414, ext. 5273 & Chaplain Douglas Ensminger, (713) 794-7200

Better Breather's Club

Meets last Wednesday every month, 1:30 p.m., Room 3C-371, Home Oxygen Clinic. Facilitator: Paula Denman, (713) 794-8979

Hepatitis C Support Group

Meets 1st Friday every month, 1:30 p.m., Primecare Clinic 4 (NASA), Room 1A-442. Facilitators: Lauri Burke & Michelle Ray, (713) 791-1414, ext. 3613/3394

Pain Management for Opioid Medication Maintenance

Meets every Tuesday, 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Renal Support Group

Meets 1st Tuesday every month, 9 a.m., Dental Conference Room 2A-312. Facilitator: Juanita Ibarra, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4834

Prostate Cancer Support Group

Meets 3rd Thursday every month, 2 p.m., Room 4C-122. Facilitators: Lillie Sonnier, (713) 791-1414, ext. 5919 & Tonjala Seals, ext. 6227

Pain Management for Women

Meets every Friday, 1 p.m., Room 5B-224. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Pain Management Pre-Pain Screening Group

Meets every Thursday, 9 a.m. and 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Dementia Caregivers Group

Meets 3rd Tuesday every month, 5 p.m., Room 1C-270. Facilitator: Yvonne S. Mack, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4082

Amputee Support Group

Meets 4th Wednesday every month, 3 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Day Room. Facilitators: Anna Bracero, (713) 794-7816 & Betty Baer, (713) 794-7793

Bereavement Support Group

Meets 4th Thursday, quarterly, 2 p.m., Room 1C-270. Facilitators: Catherine Clancy & Mattheon Mcneil, (713) 794-7373

HIV Support/Educational Group

Meets every Tuesday, 2 p.m., Clinic 4, Room 1A-442. Facilitator: Kathy Molitor, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4161 & Belinda Rainer, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6177/5292

Pain Support Group

Meets every Wednesday, 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Pain Education Group

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

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

Meets every Wednesday, 7 p.m., Room 6C-105. Facilitator: Bo Cook, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6987

Breast Cancer Support Group

Meets last Tuesday every month, 12 noon, Women's Health Center, Room 5B-224. Facilitators: Magdalena Ramirez & Shirley LaDay Smith, (713) 794-7926

Lufkin Hypertension Classes

Meets 1st Thursday every month, 2 p.m. Ask your nurse or your primary care provider, or stop by the front desk at the Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic to register.

Michael E. DeBakey
Veterans Affairs Medical Center
2002 Holcombe Blvd.
Houston, Texas 77030
(713) 791-1414
www.houston.med.va.gov

Edgar L. Tucker, BA, MPH, CHE, Director
Carlos R. Escobar, BED-Arch, MHA,
Associate Director
Thomas B. Horvath, MD, FRACP, Chief of Staff
Deloris W. Leftridge, RN, MSN, CNAA-BC, Chief
Nurse Executive/Clinical Practice Office Director
Bobbi D. Gruner, BS, MSBA, Public Affairs
Officer/Editor
Frances M. Burke, Public Affairs Specialist/Writer

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What Does Good and Bad Cholesterol Have to Do with Heart Disease?

HOUSTON - Did you know about 23 million Americans suffer from heart disease every year? Risk factors for heart disease include smoking, diabetes, high blood pressure, and blood cholesterol levels. Among these factors, cholesterol plays an extremely important role.

Cholesterol is made by the liver and is also found in meat, eggs, and high fat dairy products. Even though cholesterol is needed by the body to make hormones and digest food, excessive amounts can build up on the walls of the arteries. These deposits can block blood flow to the body and cause a heart attack.

LDL-cholesterol often called the "bad cholesterol" brings cholesterol from the liver to the body. HDL-cholesterol or the "good cholesterol" helps to rid the body of excess cholesterol.

So, what can we do to prevent heart disease? The good news is that along with exercising regularly, following a balanced diet low in saturated and trans

fat, as well as limiting dietary cholesterol can greatly decrease your risk for heart disease!

Healthy Fats

Monounsaturated fats tend to lower the "bad" LDL-cholesterol and raise the "good" HDL-cholesterol. Olive, canola, and peanut oil contain these types of fats. Nuts, such as pecans and almonds, are also excellent sources. Instead of snacking on chips reach for a handful of nuts!

Polyunsaturated fats contain omega-3 fatty acids that can reduce both cholesterol levels and triglycerides. Sources include fish, flaxseed, and soybean oil. Cold-water and fatty fish, such as salmon and albacore tuna, appear to be the most beneficial in treating heart disease. Many studies found eating fish at least twice a week can greatly reduce the risk of heart disease in both men and women.

Fats to Limit

Saturated fats raise the LDL "bad" cholesterol so it is important to limit these fats in your diet. Animal products such as meat, butter, and high-fat dairy foods are high in saturated fat.

You may be starting to notice "Trans Fat Free" or "0 Grams Trans Fat" on your food labels. Trans-fats behave like saturated fats. They are found in most types of margarine, shortening, deep-fried chips, fried fast foods, and many baked goods. When reading your food labels, a good way to detect trans fat is to watch for "partially hydrogenated oil" in the ingredients list.

Functional Foods

Certain foods have protective substances that can fight heart disease. Various butter spreads, beverages, and snack foods contain plant stanols and sterols. Eating two to three servings a day of these fortified foods can help to lower cholesterol. Eating 25 grams of protein from soy is also recommended to prevent heart disease. Good sources of soy protein include soy milk, green soybeans, and soy protein cereal.

Fiber

Fiber, specifically soluble fiber, can remove excess cholesterol from the body. The recommended intake for fiber is 25 to 30 grams but make sure to include about 10 grams per day from soluble fiber such as oats, pears, apples, and dried beans.

Knowing how to read food labels is half the battle! So, the next time you are out grocery shopping, take the time to read the labels. If you have additional questions and would like more help, visit www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/fats.html or call the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center Nutrition Clinic at (713) 791-1414, ext. 4295 or ext. 6166. ♦ Sarah Khan, MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern



Photo by Rishi D. Commerce, MEDVAMC, Public Affairs Officer

Veteran Santos Hernandez discusses the different types of cholesterol with MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern Sarah Khan. Along with exercising regularly, following a balanced diet low in saturated and trans fat and limiting dietary cholesterol can decrease the risk for heart disease.

Houston VA Earns Accreditation from National Committee for Quality Assurance

HOUSTON - On January 4, 2006, the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) awarded a three-year accreditation to the Human Research Protection Program at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC).

NCQA is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to improving health care quality. NCQA accredits and certifies a wide range of health care organizations and manages the evolution of HEDIS, the tool the nation's health plans use to measure and report on their performance.

"It is important for the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center to demonstrate our commitment to safeguarding the interests of human research participants through engagement in this accreditation program," said Edgar L. Tucker, director, MEDVAMC. In January, Tucker was advised of the national recognition and congratulated by the organization for "scoring a perfect 100."

NCQA accreditation ensures that processes are in place to inform and protect the thousands of volunteer human subjects who participate in clinical trials and other research activities every year.

The rapid expansion of medical research, drug trials, and other studies involving human subjects has increased the need to ensure that studies' risks and benefits are thoroughly weighed, that volunteers are properly informed, that adverse events are carefully monitored, and that research risks are minimized.

Both the federal Office of Human Research Protections and the Food and Drug Administration have supported accreditation as a critical component of an overall national strategy to better protect human research participants and promote greater accountability.

"This accreditation reflects the efforts of a great many employees at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center including researchers, research administrative staff, and pharmacy staff. A perfect score is not usual and I am very proud of this recognition," said Holly H. Birdsall, M.D., MEDVAMC Research Service Line executive. ♦

Free Transportation to Houston VA Available for Veterans

HOUSTON - Transportation to and from the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) in Houston from outlying areas is available by way of vans operated by various veteran service organizations and local government offices. The vans are operated as a free service for veterans seeking medical care at the MEDVAMC. Veterans are advised to call at least a week before their appointment, as several vans require reservations. Reservations are made on a first-come, first-serve basis. Call for availability, pick-up points, and schedule information:

Bay City Van, (979) 323-9235

Beaumont Vans, (409) 981-8550

Brazoria County Van, (979) 864-1289

Conroe Van, (936) 756-7614

El Campo Van, (979) 578-8387

Harris County Precinct #2 Van, (281) 452-6071

Harris County Social Services Transportation, (713) 696-1985

Lufkin Vans, (936) 633-2750

Montgomery County Vans, (936) 756-5828

Willis Van, (936) 856-5224

Woodville/Tyler County Van, (409) 283-2493

The Houston METRO offers discount fares to persons with disabilities and senior citizens. These discounts are available for both local and commuter fixed-route buses, which are all wheelchair accessible. Riders age 62 through 69 may apply for the senior citizen discount. Riders age 70 and over may travel for free using the 70+ lifetime pass if eligible. METRO's RideStores are located downtown at 1001 Travis and 1900 Main Street. They are open Monday-Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Call METROline at (713) 635-4000 for more information on discounts or METRO RideStores. ♦



**Answers
provided by the
Consumer Affairs Staff
Room 1B-270
(713) 794-7883
(713) 794-7884**

**or email
vhahougeneralquestions@med.va.gov**

Question: What is the limit on VA home loans?

Answer: America's veterans and their families now have a greater chance to make their dreams of home ownership a reality, thanks to an increase in the VA home loan guaranty limit. Effective January 1, 2006, changes in the loan guaranty limits will mean veterans are able to get no-down payment loans up to \$417,000. The previous ceiling was \$359,650.

The Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2004 tied increases in the VA guaranty to increases in the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation's conforming loan limit. When this limit increases, VA guaranty limits also go up, allowing VA to keep pace with rising home values.

VA-guaranteed home loans are made by banks and mortgage companies to veterans, service members, and reservists. With VA guaranteeing a portion of the loan, veterans can receive a competitive interest rate without making a down payment, making it easier

to buy a home.

More information about VA home loan benefits is available on the Web at www.homeloans.va.gov or by calling 1-800-827-1000.

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

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

Question: Does the VA assist veterans who suffered traumatic injuries while on active duty?

Answer: American troops and their families now have more financial security because of a new VA Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance Traumatic Injury Protection (TSGLI) program. The TSGLI payments, ranging from \$25,000 to \$100,000, are made to service members who have suffered certain traumatic injuries while on active duty.

The new insurance program became effective December 1, 2005, and is designed to provide financial help to military families through extended periods of medical care and healing. Benefits are also payable retroactively to October 7, 2001 for service members and veterans who suffered certain traumatic injuries while serving in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom.

If you have eligibility questions, visit VA's website at www.insurance.va.gov or to call the Office of Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance at 1-800-419-1473 for more information.

The VA administers one of the largest insurance programs in the United States, providing coverage for active duty

and reserve military personnel, veterans, and their families, supervising programs that include more than seven-and-a-half million policies with a face value of more than \$1.1 trillion of insurance benefits.

Question: My uncle, a veteran, died a few years ago. Can the VA help me find where he is buried?

Answer: The burial locations of more than 5 million veterans for whom the VA has provided grave markers are now available on the Internet, as well as the information inscribed on the markers.

Online since April 2004, the nationwide gravesite locator (<http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov>) helps veterans' families, former comrades-in-arms, and others find the graves of veterans.

VA recently added 1.9 million records for veterans buried primarily in private cemeteries to its database. The gravesite locator previously carried records on 3 million veterans buried in VA national cemeteries since the Civil War, and in state veterans cemeteries and Arlington National Cemetery since 1999.

The new records date from January 1997, the earliest time for which electronic records exist. The information comes from applications made for these veterans' headstones or markers. Beyond the 5 million records now available, VA continues to add approximately 1,000 new records to the database each day.

Last year, VA furnished nearly 369,000 inscribed headstones and markers for veterans' graves worldwide.

Internet users only need to provide the last name of the deceased veteran or dependent. Typically, the information available includes name, birth and death dates, rank, branch of service, and the address and phone number of the cemetery.

Veterans whose discharges are other

than dishonorable, their spouses, and dependent children may be buried in a national cemetery, regardless of where they live. No advance reservations are made. VA provides perpetual care, as well as a headstone or marker, a burial flag and a memorial certificate to survivors.

Information on VA burial benefits can be obtained from national cemetery offices, from a VA Web site at www.cem.va.gov or by calling VA regional offices toll-free at 1-800-827-1000.

Question: Am I eligible for a nursing home?

Answer: Veterans requiring nursing home care for a service-connected condition or a veteran rated 70 percent or more have mandatory eligibility. All other veterans are eligible on a resource and space-available basis. The best source for determining what assistance is your social worker.

Social workers are assigned to each clinic at the MEDVAMC and provide a variety of services including information on Advance Directives; advocacy; assistance with alternative living arrangements such as emergency shelters, assisted living, boarding homes, nursing homes, and veteran's homes; clinical dependency assessments and treatment; information on financial assistance and benefits programs; HIV counseling; home assessments; information and/or referral to community resources; and individual, family and group therapy. If you can not locate your social worker or have questions about available services, call (713) 791-1414, ext. 5735.

Question: I don't have health insurance, will the VA still treat me?

Answer: Yes, whether a veteran has or does not have insurance plays no role in determining whether that individual is eligible for VA health care benefits.

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
Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic (Lufkin)	(936) 637-1342 or toll-free 1-800-209-3120
Galveston VA Outpatient Clinic	(409) 741-0256 or toll-free 1-800-310-5001
Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic	(409) 986-1129 or toll-free 1-800-310-5001
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/Galveston/Texas City	(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

*The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center
presents a special*

American Ex-POW Program

*honoring our Nation's
Former Prisoners of War*

*Friday, April 7, 2006
10 a.m.*

MEDVAMC 4th Floor Auditorium

Guest Speaker:

Arthur Jones, World War II POW

*Drill Team Demonstration by Milby High School JROTC.
Refreshments served.*

*For more information, contact the Public Affairs Office
at (713) 794-7349 or bobbi.gruner@med.va.gov.*