



Register Today for National Veterans Golden Age Games, Held This Year in Houston

HOUSTON – The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) will host the 2007 Department of Veterans Affairs' National Golden Age Games, August 27 – 31, 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.

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 sporting events and activities allowing veterans to demonstrate their skills, competitiveness, and spirit.

The Golden Age Games are 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. Last year's event was held May 7 - 12, 2006 in Hampton, Virginia.

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.

If you would like to register to compete, contact one of the MEDVAMC Team Coaches, Jemarques Handy at (713) 791-1414, ext. 3537; Stacey Spicer at (713) 791-1414, ext. 5431; or Dennis Jones at (713) 791-1414, ext. 5524. For more information about the Golden Age Games, visit <http://www1.va.gov/vetevent/gag/2006/index.htm>. ♦

The new VA-staffed Conroe Community Based Outpatient Clinic is scheduled to open early next year.

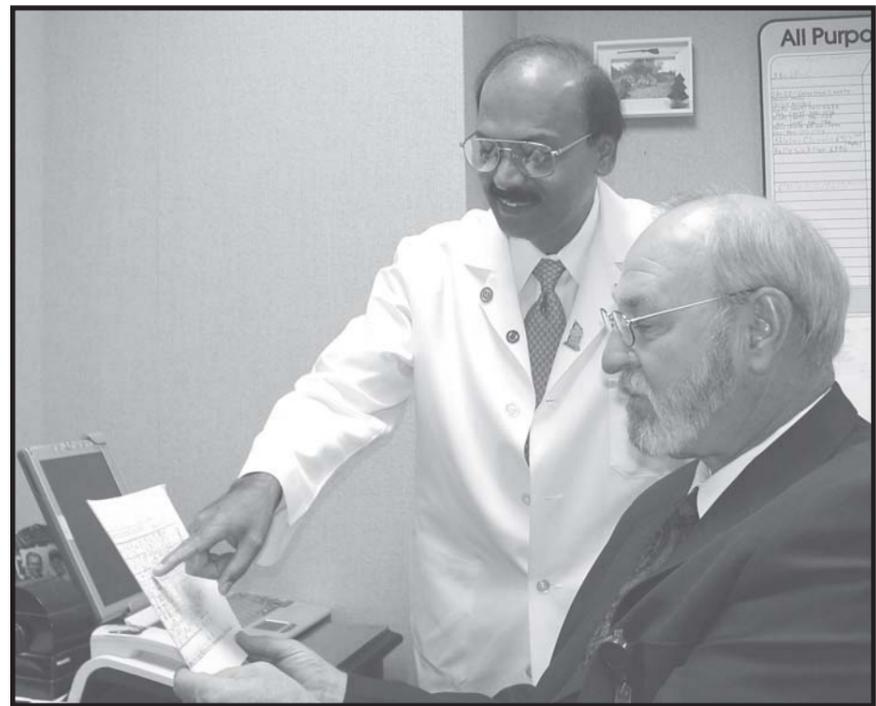
VA Plans Opening of New Outpatient Clinic in Conroe Offering Primary Care Services

HOUSTON - Fulfilling a commitment to veterans living north of Houston, the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC) has signed a contract to lease space in Conroe in order to establish and operate a new VA-staffed Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) offering primary care and mental health services. The new CBOC will be conveniently located at 800 Riverwood Court near the Conroe Regional Medical Center, just off Loop 336 and Interstate 45. It is scheduled to open early next year.

"Our goal is to improve access to health care and this new clinic in Conroe will greatly expand the VA's capacity for outpatient care in southeast Texas. With this new clinic, veterans living north of Houston will now be able to obtain health care closer to where they live," said Edgar L. Tucker, MEDVAMC director. The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates more than 44,000 veterans live in Montgomery and surrounding counties.

"We continue to pursue hiring health care professionals with the credentials

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J. Kalavar, M.D., Prime Care director at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, confers with Larry Steward, health systems specialist about the exam room layout for the new Conroe Community Based Outpatient Clinic located at 800 Riverwood Court next to the Conroe Regional Medical Center, just off Loop 336 and Interstate 45.

New procedure provides significant improvement in quality of life to patients suffering from spinal fractures due to osteoporosis.

Physicians at Houston VA Use Balloons to Fix Bones

HOUSTON – Recently, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center began offering Balloon Kyphoplasty, a minimally invasive treatment option for patients suffering from spinal fractures due to osteoporosis. Balloon Kyphoplasty is designed to correct spinal deformity due to osteoporotic fractures, significantly reducing back pain and improving a patient's ability to return to daily activities.

Osteoporosis is a disease that causes the bones of the spine to weaken and often collapse, resulting in spinal fractures. Traditional treatment for spinal fractures includes bed rest, medication, and back bracing. While these therapies may help to decrease a patient's pain over time, they do not treat the deformity related to the osteoporotic fractures.

"This minimally invasive procedure is designed to repair vertebral compression fractures and restore the vertebrae to the correct position, reducing back pain, reducing the number

of days in bed, significantly improving mobility, and increasing overall quality of life," said Majdi Radaideh, M.D., Diagnostic & Therapeutic Care Line neuroradiologist.

In Balloon Kyphoplasty, small orthopedic balloons are used to gently elevate the collapsed bone in an attempt to restore the fractured vertebra back to its normal shape and correct the vertebral body deformity. First, a hollow instrument is used to create a small pathway into the fractured bone. A small, orthopedic balloon is guided through the instrument into the vertebra. The incision sites are each approximately one centimeter in length. Next, the balloon is carefully inflated in an attempt to raise the collapsed vertebra and return it to its normal position.

Once the vertebra is in the correct position, the balloon is deflated and removed. This process creates a cavity

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ASK NOW
about your
FLU SHOT

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6th Annual Stand Down Provides Much Needed Assistance to More Than 335 Houston-Area Homeless Veterans

HOUSTON – The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC), in cooperation with the Task Force for Houston Area Homeless Veterans, the Coalition for the Homeless, and U.S. Veterans Initiative, hosted the 6th Annual Houston Area Stand Down for homeless veterans on November 8 and 9, 2006 at Midtown Terrace Suites located at 4640 Main Street.

“Stand Down” is military terminology referring to the brief period of time a soldier leaves an active combat area in order to rest and regain strength. Stand Downs are one part of the Department of Veterans Affairs’ efforts to provide services to homeless veterans.

During this two day event, more than 335 homeless veterans including 17 women received services from 60 community agencies such as Service of the Emergency Aid Resource Center for the Homeless (SEARCH), Harris County Hospital District, Savannah’s Beauty School, Goodwill, Salvation Army, MEDVAMC Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program, and the

Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program.

“It was the tireless efforts and dedication of 250 volunteers helping homeless veterans get back on their feet that made this event such a success,” said Theresa Riha, L.C.S.W., Houston Area Stand Down chair and MEDVAMC social worker.

Veterans enjoyed hot meals, showers, clean clothes, haircuts, and health screenings. VA and Social Security benefits counseling, legal aid, and referrals to a variety of other necessary services, such as housing, employment and substance abuse treatment were also available. Seven veterans received job offers on the spot. Transitional housing was also coordinated for several veterans and 19 received dental care.

“This was the second Stand Down I volunteered for. As an Army veteran, I enjoy helping others and want to assist other veterans who may need a hand up,” said Sebrina Felder-Onwuemene, who served hot meals to the appreciative participants.”

The MEDVAMC Health Care for



David Sands, L.C.S.W., social worker for MEDVAMC’s Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program, and Paula Newerl, MEDVAMC Eligibility specialist, assist a homeless veteran to register for VA benefits and services.

Homeless Veterans program’s goal is to end homelessness among veterans through outreach efforts and community partnerships. Veterans are engaged in treatment and rehabilitation programs that enable them to achieve a better quality of life.

Any person who has served in the U.S. military/armed forces who meets VA eligibility requirements, as well as veterans who do not have adequate housing, are facing mental health or substance abuse problems, agree to a referral for VA assistance, and do not have adequate income or other resources that enable them to be self-supportive, are eligible for assistance from the MEDVAMC Health Care for Homeless Veterans program.

The program offers services such as residential programs and transitional housing placement, medical care, alcohol

and substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, case management, veterans benefit counseling, vocational rehabilitation assessment, and job training and employment opportunities.

If you would like more information, call the MEDVAMC Health Care for Homeless Veterans program at (713) 794-7848.

The MEDVAMC also operates a Drop-In Center located inside the DeGeorge at Union Station at 1418 Preston Avenue near Minute Maid Park. The DeGeorge Project is a supportive housing project for homeless veterans providing services ranging from accessing health care, employment assistance, transitional housing guidance, and outreach to homeless veterans. The DeGeorge Project can be reached at (713) 224-1418. ♦ Fran Burke, MEDVAMC Public Affairs Specialist

A Word from the Director . . .

Get Involved with National Salute Week

HOUSTON - February 11 through 17, 2007 is a special time at Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers across the nation. Established as an official VA program in 1978, this week is known as National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans and is an annual event designed to increase awareness of hospitalized veterans and the sacrifices they have made for our nation. Here in Houston, it is an opportunity for the public to visit the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC), meet America’s veterans, and explore the various aspects of our facility’s volunteer program.

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

In many cases, students deliver their Valentines in person. It is so touching to see how young children brighten the lives of hospitalized veterans with their colorful Valentines. Cards come in every shape and size - and are made with everything from baseball cards, stickers, and colored doilies to crayons, construction paper, and stamps. One thing all of these cards have in common is they are made with love and respect for our nation’s veterans.

In addition to school children,



Edgar L. Tucker, Medical Center Director

hospitalized veterans and those with outpatient clinic appointments receive visits and enjoy special programs provided by community and area veteran service organizations, ROTC and Junior ROTC members, elected officials, celebrities, and local personalities throughout the week. These visits have traditionally included personal time together sharing stories and interests, musical programs, and distribution of U.S. flags.

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

I encourage you to consider sending a Valentine to a hospitalized veteran or visiting the MEDVAMC in support of the week’s special activities. I know you will enjoy the wonderful atmosphere created by staff and volunteers to honor our nation’s heroes. The cheer and well wishes spread to hospitalized veterans is quite “contagious” and is a “prescription you can fill!”

Call our Voluntary Service Program at (713) 794-7135 to schedule a visit or for more information. ♦

Refill Your Prescriptions Online

It’s fast, easy, convenient, and secure!

Visit
www.myhealth.va.gov
on the
Internet and
register today.



This Web site is the gateway to veteran health benefits and services, providing access to trusted health information, links to Federal and VA benefits and resources, your Personal Health Journal, and online VA prescription refills. In the future, registrants will be able to view appointments, copay balances, and key portions of their VA medical records online, and much more!

Donated Military Portrait of Dr. Michael E. DeBakey Unveiled During Ceremony

HOUSTON - In 2004, the Texas Medical Center commissioned world-renowned American Artist Aaron Shikler to paint a portrait of Michael E. DeBakey, M.D. receiving the Legion of Merit from the U.S. Army. Shikler is noted for portraits of American statesmen including his posthumous character study of John F. Kennedy, "Oil Portrait of John F. Kennedy," which serves as Kennedy's official White House portrait.

On November 17, 2006, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center held a special ceremony to unveil this portrait in the main lobby of the hospital. Dignitaries at the event included 98-year-old DeBakey, U.S. Representative Al Green, U.S. Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, Harris County Judge Robert Eckels, and Texas Medical Center President Richard E. Wainerdi, Ph.D.

Medical pioneer, steadfast veteran, ingenious inventor and innovator, gifted mentor and teacher, international statesman, and premier physician, DeBakey has served his fellow man his entire life, but his military service to our country and his invaluable contributions to veteran health care frequently go unrecognized.

With the U.S. Surgeon General's office during World War II, Col. DeBakey developed the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (M.A.S.H.) unit for

treating battlefield casualties, significantly reducing the fatality rate for the wounded. He later helped establish the specialized medical and surgical center system for treating military personnel returning from war, subsequently the Veterans Health Administration.

Through his work with the Hoover Commission, DeBakey was instrumental in the conversion of the old Houston Navy Hospital to the Veterans Administration Hospital on April 15, 1949. Acting on orders from President Truman to assume operation of the Navy Hospital, Warren Magnuson, M.D., the medical director of the Veterans Administration in Washington, called upon DeBakey to organize and direct staffing at the hospital. DeBakey also established the Dean's Committee, and as the chief surgeon at the Houston Veterans Administration Hospital, created an accredited residency program for the facility.

In recognition of DeBakey's tireless efforts on behalf of our nation's veterans, the U.S. Congress passed, and on December 6, 2003, the President signed Public Law 108-70, Section 243 officially changing the name of the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Houston, Texas to the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center. ♦



Whilemena Robertson Smith congratulates Michael E. DeBakey, M.D. after the ceremony unveiling his military portrait at the MEDVAMC on November 17, 2006.

Houston VA Physician Instrumental in Testing and Evaluation of Body Armor for U.S. Troops



Soldiers from the Texas Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 149th Aviation Regiment based at Ellington Field in Houston and 449th Aviation Support Battalion are currently deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Unit member CW4 Dave Wilrich is equipped with the "Interceptor Body Armor."

HOUSTON - Francis H. Gannon, M.D., a staff physician with the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) Diagnostic and Therapeutic Care Line, will receive a Department of Defense award for his role in the testing and evaluation of a key piece of battlefield equipment, worn by U.S. troops for the first time during the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The new lightweight protective vest, officially dubbed "Interceptor Body Armor," was first credited in 2002 for holding down casualties in the battle for Shah-i-Kot, Afghanistan. Some soldiers pinned down in fire fights survived AK-47 and other small-arms fire to their chest and back because of the new vest. After the battle, soldiers noted most of the wounds suffered by U.S. troops were in the arms and legs.

"The goal of the study was to evaluate what was then the current body armor worn into combat as to its efficacy. With new testing approaches, we determined the armor being fielded was inadequate to effectively protect the fighting man or woman. We tested several other types of hybrid body armors and selected the one that stopped almost all of the direct ballistic impacts that had previously resulted in death," said Gannon, who was involved with the body armor study when he worked at the Armed Forces Institute of

Pathology.

The Interceptor Body Armor is a modular, multiple-threat body armor composed of ergonomically designed front and back plates, and an outer tactical vest. The vest weighs 8.4 pounds without plates and protects against fragmentation and 9mm rounds. The small arms protective insert plates can withstand multiple small arms hits. The weight of the total system is 16.4 lbs, nine pounds lighter than the old Kevlar version.

Attachable throat, groin, shoulder/upper arm, and armpit/underarm protectors provide increased protection, and webbing attachment loops on the front of the vest allow soldiers to tailor loads to meet mission needs.

Due to the significance of this work, its life-saving capability, and potential for injury prevention, the Department of Defense will present an award to Gannon acknowledging his contributions in this endeavor.

"This state-of-the-art body armor has provided unprecedented protection against serious and lethal bullet and fragmentation wounds and has saved the lives of thousands of our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Michael Ittmann, M.D., MEDVAMC Pathology and Laboratory chief.

During Fiscal Year 2006, the MEDVAMC saw 1,565 patients from the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. ♦

Spinal Cord Injury Care and Inpatient Rehab Programs Re-Accredited

HOUSTON – The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) was notified last October that it was awarded three-year CARF accreditations for its Spinal Cord Injury Care Line Program and Rehabilitation Care Line's Comprehensive Integrated Inpatient Rehabilitation Program (CIIRP).

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 quality, value, and optimal outcomes.

A three year accreditation is the highest level of accreditation an organization may be awarded. In the survey summary, the MEDVAMC was recognized for strengths in many areas. The report notes in the Spinal Cord Injury Care Line, "There is a significant amount of expertise and diversity of specializations among the program directors. In addition, the programs provide special services, including home adaptive behavior education, assisted living, onsite visits by outside specialists as needed, and the addition of the Paralyzed Veterans of America to the treatment team."

"The outstanding survey results reflect the specialized knowledge, skills, and dedication that are demonstrated daily by all of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center staff who provide care and supportive services for veterans with spinal cord injuries," said Sally A. Holmes, M.D., Spinal Cord Injury Care Line executive.

For the CIIRP, the report notes, "The wide array of excellent resources, ranging from the high caliber of staff to the modern equipment, benefit persons served. Particularly noteworthy is the recent development of a Polytrauma Center established specifically to meet the needs of wounded active military personnel."

"We have a dedicated, professional, energetic team working hard to meet our veterans' needs. I am very pleased to see them receive the acknowledgement they so richly deserve," said Helene K. Henson, M.D., MEDVAMC Rehabilitation Care Line executive.

"I am very proud the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center has received such important recognition," said Edgar L. Tucker, MEDVAMC director. "Our Spinal Cord Injury and Rehabilitation Care Line staff and their practices are top-notch. I am pleased we serve as such a positive example for other hospitals." ♦

Journal Article by VA Physician Reveals Spinal Epidural Infections on the Rise



Veteran Jerry Hall, a patient on the MEDVAMC Spinal Cord Injury Unit, discusses treatment options with Rabih O. Darouiche, M.D., a staff physician in the Medical and Spinal Cord Injury Care Lines.

HOUSTON – Infections in the space around the spinal cord have increased over the past decade and many are associated with antibiotic-resistant bacteria, according to a review that appeared in the November 9, 2006 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine* by Rabih O. Darouiche, M.D., staff physician, Michael E. DeBakey VA

Medical Center (MEDVAMC).

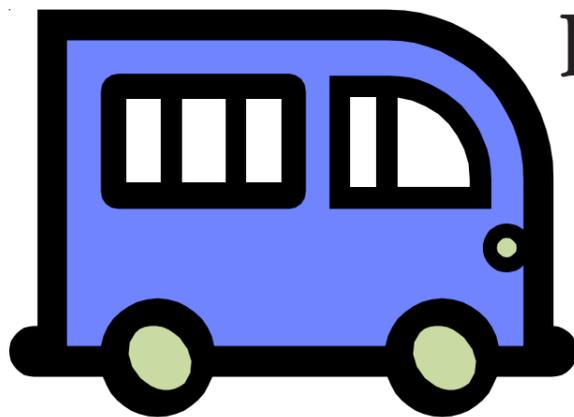
The article notes abscesses caused by Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) are increasingly the cause of such infections. "However, what was most significant and alarming was the fact that the majority of cases continue to be misdiagnosed upon initial presentation," said Darouiche.

MRSA is a more serious form of a common bacteria that frequently inhabits the skin or nostrils of healthy people. Due to its resistance to antibiotics commonly used in treatment, MRSA is one of the most rapidly growing and virulent health care associated infections, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is responsible for more than 100,000 U.S. hospitalizations each year.

The most common sources of spinal epidural infection include bloodstream infection associated with a central venous catheter, intravenous drug use, catheter-related urinary tract infection, vertebral osteomyelitis, spinal catheter for pain relief or stimulation, and infected pressure sores.

"Treatment of patients with this type of infection requires well-coordinated multidisciplinary care by emergency medicine physicians, hospitalists, internists, infectious-disease physicians, neurologists, neurosurgeons, orthopedic surgeons, nurses, and physical and occupational therapists," said Darouiche.

Darouiche, a staff physician in the Medical Care and Spinal Cord Injury Care Lines at the MEDVAMC, is also the founder and director of the Center for Prostheses Infection of Baylor College of Medicine. He is board certified in internal medicine, infectious disease, and spinal cord injury medicine. ♦



Free Transportation to Houston VA Available for Area 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. ♦

Once a patient suffers one vertebral compression fracture, the risk of suffering a second fracture increases five-fold.

Houston VA Is Fixing Bones with Balloons

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within the vertebral body. The cavity is filled with a special cement to support the surrounding bone and prevent further collapse. The cement forms an internal cast holding the vertebra in place.

“There has been an expansion of treatment options for spine conditions at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center following the arrival of Bruce Ehni, M.D., the new chief of Neurosurgery. Dr. Ehni’s vision of expansion includes offering more

advanced, minimally invasive procedures and surgical techniques. Kyphoplasty is just one of these new, cutting-edge procedures greatly benefiting our veterans,” said Radaideh.

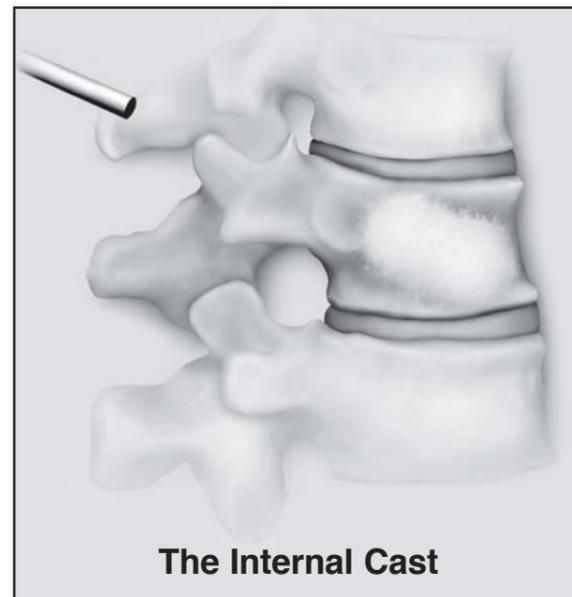
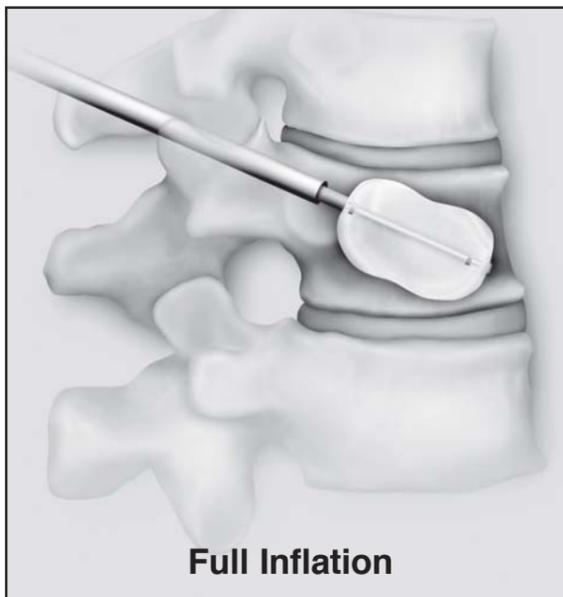
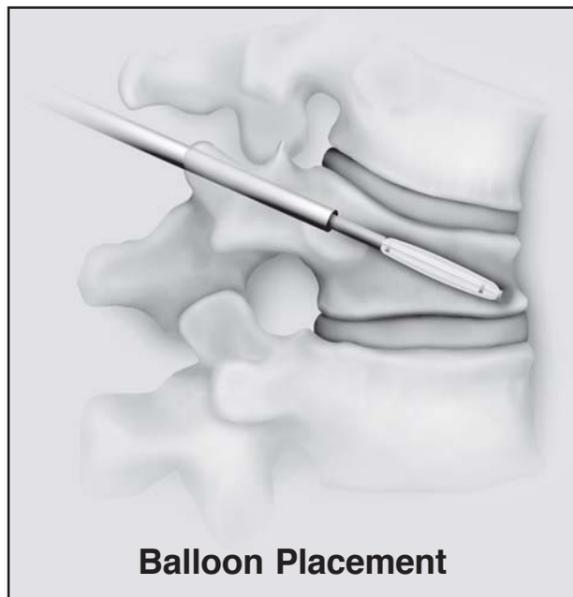
According to the National Osteoporosis Foundation, each year 700,000 patients in the U.S. suffer spinal fractures due to osteoporosis. Unfortunately, more than 400,000 of these fractures go undiagnosed and untreated due in part to a lack of awareness about osteoporosis and available treatment options.

The consequences of untreated fractures can be devastating. Once a patient suffers one vertebral compression fracture, the risk of suffering a second fracture increases five-fold. Left unattended, many fractures can result in an exaggerated rounded curvature of the spine, called kyphosis or dowager’s hump. This condition is painful and debilitating — making walking, eating, sleeping, and even breathing painful and difficult.

Performed using real-time X-ray, Balloon Kyphoplasty usually requires

only two small incisions in the back for each fracture treated. The procedure generally takes less than one hour per fracture and has been performed under both local and general anesthesia.

“Veterans at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center continue to benefit from the latest scientific advances in health care and the newest technology available on the market today,” said Meena S. Vij, M.D., Diagnostic and Therapeutic Care Line executive. ♦ *Diagrams and portions of this article courtesy Kyphon Inc.*



VA Reminds with Stroke, Every Minute Counts

HOUSTON - Stroke is the number one cause of adult disability in the U.S., and the third leading cause of death. More than 700,000 people experience a new or recurrent stroke each year. Every 45 seconds an American has a stroke; every three minutes someone dies of a stroke in this country; and 15-30 percent of stroke survivors have serious long-term disability.

In response to this serious health issue, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) established a Stroke Center in 2005 to ensure veterans receive timely evaluation with diagnostic procedures and appropriate guidelines established by the Stroke Council of the American Heart Association.

MEDVAMC wants you to know you can reduce the injury associated with stroke by getting to a hospital *fast*. Treatments are available to limit the damage of a stroke, but therapy must be started within the first hours after the onset of symptoms. The sooner you seek treatment, the better.

Everyone should have a plan for what they would do in the event of a stroke, and the first step is to recognize the symptoms. The second step is to call 911 if you experience one or more of these symptoms:

✓ Sudden numbness or weakness of face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body.

✓ Sudden confusion, trouble speaking, or understanding speech.

✓ Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes.

✓ Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination.

✓ Sudden severe headache.

A stroke is an injury to the brain caused when a blood vessel that feeds the brain is either closed off by a clot (cutting off the blood supply to part of the brain) or bursts (with bleeding into or around the brain).

Stroke damage in the brain can affect the entire body, resulting in mild to severe disabilities. These include paralysis, problems with thinking, problems with speaking, and emotional problems.

Although anyone can have a stroke, it is more common in people over the age of 55 and in those who smoke, have high blood pressure, diabetes, or increased cholesterol.

The good news is you can take steps to reduce your risk, but you need to be able to recognize a stroke and have a plan for what you will do. The best way is to make a ‘Plan for Prevention’ with your MEDVAMC Prime Care Provider. Your plan should include regular check-ups, a plan to quit smoking if you smoke, regular exercise, and a well-balanced diet.

Remember, time is life. If you believe you are having a stroke, do not wait for symptoms to worsen. The longer the blood flow is cut off to the brain, the greater the damage will be. Get medical help immediately - it may make the difference in avoiding a lifelong disability. ♦

Don't Be A "No Show"

**Call VA Network Telecare Center
at (713) 794-8985
or toll free 1 (800) 639-5137
to cancel.**



Please cancel at least 24 hours in advance so we can offer your appointment to another veteran.

☐ Keeping your scheduled VA health care appointments ensures your continued access to care and medications from the MEDVAMC.

☐ Failure to keep appointments may result in your removal from your primary care provider’s panel of patients and cancellation of specialty care consultations.

☐ If you are taking certain medications requiring continuous medical monitoring, missing appointments may force your health care provider to cancel your refills.

Please don't be a "No Show."

If you cannot remember when your next appointment is or have not received an appointment letter from the MEDVAMC, call the Appointment Information Hotline at (713) 794-7648 or toll-free 1 (800) 454-1062.

Using Sugar Substitutes – Pink, Blue, or Yellow?



MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern Kathy Teal assembles meal trays for veteran inpatients. For information about individual weight loss counseling with a registered dietitian, call the MEDVAMC Nutrition Clinic at (713) 791-1414, ext. 4295 or ext. 6166.

HOUSTON - It is 2007, and the celebration and joys of the holiday season are now just a memory. If you are like me, the festivities not only left me with quite a few memories, but also a few extra pounds. All of those delicious pies, cakes, and cookies were definitely too good to pass up.

What is a good way to get back on track and reduce calories? Start with

replacing the sugar in your ice tea, on your cereal, or in that recipe with a sugar substitute.

The most popular sugar substitutes have become commonly known as the "pink pack," "blue pack," or "yellow pack." These little packets of sweetness have become a staple for many individuals trying to cut calories. There are official names to accompany the

colored packets: Sweet-N-Low™ (pink), Equal™ (blue), and Splenda™ (yellow). Each brand provides a slightly different taste, so it is up to the individual to choose their favorite.

Saccharin, sold under the name Sweet-N-Low™, is 200 to 700 times sweeter than sugar. It is the highest intensity sweetener in the world. In 1982, scientists determined it caused cancer in rats and warning labels were required on products containing Saccharin. In 2001, additional research determined the warnings were unfounded and labels no longer were required. Saccharin is approved for consumption in more than 100 countries.

Equal™ or Aspartame is 160 to 220 times sweeter than sugar. It was approved in 1981 for use in certain products including gum, cereal, pudding, and tabletop sweetener. In 1996, it was approved for use in all foods and beverages. Products with Aspartame are labeled with "This product contains phenylalanine."

Sucralose, sold under the name Splenda™, is 600 times sweeter than sugar. It was approved in 1989 for use in certain products, and in 1999, for use in all foods and beverages.

Manufacturers are now also producing sugar substitutes which can be used in baked goods. Splenda™ is great for baking and its manufacturer also offers a brown sugar substitute as

well, a blend of Splenda™ and "regular" sugar. The chemical make-up of this product allows for baking results almost identical to those of regular sugar, but with fewer calories and carbohydrates. The price tag on these replacements might cause some hesitation, but they are useful in losing weight to improve your overall health.

No-calorie sweeteners provide sweet taste without increasing energy intake. They take zero calories per gram to sweeten, and used in moderation, will add no energy to the diet and will not affect blood sugar levels.

A word of caution - there are also new products hitting the grocery store claiming to act as sugar substitutes, but labeled as dietary supplements. These products, in most cases, have not been tested and approved by the FDA as safe to use as a substitute for sugar. Be leery of new products promising fabulous results, especially if you have pre-existing health problems. Talk to your Prime Care Provider or a registered dietitian at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center before trying these products.

Keep in mind that sugar-free on the label does not always mean fat-free or calorie free. When talking about foods or calorie-containing beverages, it is not okay to eat or drink as much as you want. It is important to be aware of what other ingredients are in the item. You can do this by reading the nutrition label, or if it is homemade, simply ask the person who prepared the dish.

Substituting sugar is a helpful way to reduce calories, but it should not be the only action you take to lose weight. A healthy lifestyle involves a well balanced diet as well as regular physical activity and lots of water.

For more information about weight loss or individual counseling with a registered dietitian, call the MEDVAMC Nutrition Clinic at (713) 791-1414, ext. 4295 or ext. 6166. For more information about sugar substitutes, visit www.fda.gov.

◆ Kathy Teal, MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern

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., Primicare Clinic 5, Room 1A-442. Facilitators: Stacey Pelton & Michelle Ray, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6867/3394

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

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This publication is funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs and is an authorized publication for veterans of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. Contents of the newspaper are not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, the United States Government or the Department of Veterans Affairs. *VA Pride* is produced bi-monthly by Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center Public Affairs, Room 4A-206, mailcode 580/00PA, telephone number (713) 794-7349, fax number (713) 794-7038, and e-mail address bobbi.gruner@med.va.gov. Your comments, suggestions, ideas, and questions are always appreciated. All submissions are subject to editing and will not be returned to the sender.

Family and friends may feel helpless when their loved one begins to experience even mild memory changes . . .

Tips for Working Through Memory Problems

HOUSTON - The frustration surrounding memory problems for those with Parkinson's disease (PD) also affects spouses, friends, and family members. Family and friends may feel helpless when their loved one begins to experience even mild memory changes for activities that are familiar, such as the sequence of steps required for putting gas in the car or weekly pills in a medicine container. Other challenging tasks are those that involve learning new motor skills (assembling a light fixture) and switching from one task to another (talking on the phone and paying the bills).

It is helpful to reduce anxiety for the person who has difficulty with memory and thinking. Give the person plenty of time to think over the question instead of immediately providing the answer or hurrying the discussion.

Memory problems in PD require the patience and understanding of everyone because the patient's brain may be slower to respond (bradyphrenia) even if the changes are not severe.

Communication is essential when a person with PD has mild memory problems. Ask the patient how much prompting and assistance he wants when he becomes forgetful. For example, many frustrations occur in the car when the person with PD is driving, when specific instructions are being given about the schedule for the day, or the completion of household tasks.

Ask your loved one: "How and when would you like me to comment or correct you when I know you are mistaken? I don't want to be critical but we need to work this out together."

Sometimes the person with PD will want family members to help them at the time of memory lapse, others prefer



Eugene C. Lai, M.D., Ph.D., director of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center's Parkinson's Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Center (PADRECC) examines veteran Cal Raines during a recent appointment. Memory problems in Parkinson's Disease require the patience and understanding of everyone because the patient's brain may be slower to respond even if the changes are not severe.

to ask for help or clarification before being corrected. Occasionally, persons with changes in memory may become agitated when reminded. This reaction needs to be handled with reassurance and kindness, and later followed by a sensitive discussion.

Communication about memory and thinking should take place at appropriate intervals because the PD patient's preferences and abilities may change. These interactions should be relaxed and private, and need to be avoided when performing potentially dangerous activities such as driving.

The quality of life for persons with PD is improved when family members and friends are supportive and understanding with their loved ones who are experiencing changes in their memory and thinking abilities. These few practical suggestions may reduce the stress for all involved.

For more information about PD, current research, and educational events for patients and family members, visit www.parkinsons.va.gov/Parkinsons/Houston/index.asp. ♦ Naomi Nelson, Ph.D., RN, PADRECC Co-Associate Director of Education

New Conroe Clinic

(continued from page 1)

and qualifications necessary to staff the clinic. We are as eager as the veterans in the Conroe area to open this clinic, but have an obligation to ensure the quality of health care matches the high standards our veterans have come to expect and rightly deserve from the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center," said Jay Kalavar, M.D. Prime Care director.

In May 2004, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs announced the details of a comprehensive plan to modernize the VA health care system. In the Houston area, the plan included new CBOCs in the vicinities of Galveston and Conroe. On March 4, 2005, the MEDVAMC held a ribbon cutting ceremony celebrating the opening of a new CBOC on 6115 Avenue L in Galveston. Another new CBOC, located at the Mainland Mall Shopping Center in Texas City, opened on April 4, 2005.

VA officials are also working to replace the Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic in Lufkin. In January 2006, VA obtained an assignable option to purchase approximately seven acres of land located at 2206 John Redditt Drive for the construction of a new outpatient clinic.

In fiscal year 2006, the MEDVAMC served more than 116,000 enrolled veterans. There were 681,669 outpatient visits at the Houston facility, 55,172 outpatient visits at the Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic, 44,117 outpatient visits at the Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic in Lufkin, and 28,527 outpatient visits at the Galveston/Texas City CBOCs. ♦

Are You Just Feeling "Blue" or Is It Something More?

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

Depression affects the whole person. It affects physical well-being, thoughts, and feelings.

It can affect the way a person thinks and feels, both physically and emotionally. Some people with depression have aches and pains such as headaches and back-aches. Depression is not a sign of weakness and is in no way an indication that a person is "crazy."

Depression is very common. It is more common than cancer, lung disease, or diabetes. Depression affects 10 million American men and women of all ages each year. Studies show that up

to 20 percent of people will experience depression at some point in their life.

People who suffer from other medical illnesses are more likely to have depression symptoms. As depression has become more widely discussed, more people have come forward to share their experiences. Mike Wallace, reporter on the TV program *60 Minutes*, former First Lady Barbara Bush and author Kurt Vonnegut are just a few people who have struggled with depression and have shared their experiences with the public.

This illness can be treated, but it is often not recognized by patients and VA health care providers. Some of the warning signs of depression are listed below. If you have any of these warning signs of depression, you should be sure to talk with your VA health care provider about depression.

Warning Signs of Depression

- ✓ Persistently feeling down, sad, blue, tearful, or irritable
- ✓ Difficulty sleeping such as insomnia, early waking, or sleeping too much
- ✓ Feeling fatigued, slowed down, or lacking energy
- ✓ Feeling restless or unable to sit still
- ✓ Changes in appetite or weight gain/loss

- ✓ Loss of interest in friends and activities previously enjoyed
- ✓ Feeling helpless, worthless, or guilty
- ✓ Feeling pessimistic or hopeless
- ✓ Problems concentrating, thinking, remembering, or making decisions
- ✓ Thinking about death or suicide
- ✓ Recurring aches and pains (such as headache, stomach ache, back pains) that do not respond to medical treatment
- ✓ Anxiety, nervousness, or tension

Your health care provider or a mental health professional can tell you if your symptoms are caused by clinical depression. You may have some lab tests to rule out medical problems such as hormone imbalances; however, there are no tests that directly diagnose depression.

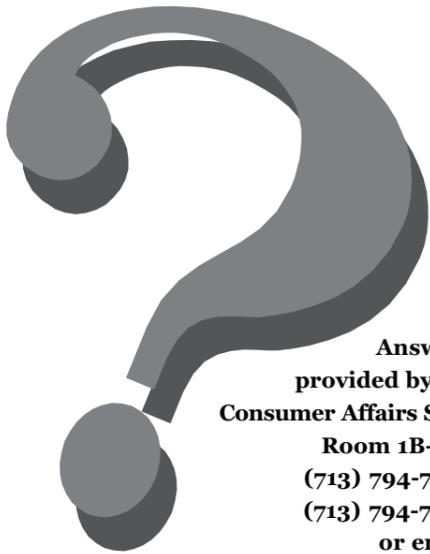
You should not try to overcome clinical depression by yourself. Depression can be successfully treated with psychotherapy, antidepressant medicine, or both. Discuss this with your health care provider or therapist.

Depression is not a weakness or punishment. Many things can cause it. Some people can pinpoint a single trigger event, while others experience a variety

of events and feelings related to their depression. Still others become depressed for no apparent reason. It is not the depressed person's fault that he or she is depressed, nor is it a weakness. Depression may be an inherited condition for some people. One may have close relatives who also have suffered from depression. Depression can begin in the brain where messages about moving, thinking, and feeling are relayed by electrical and chemical signals in the nerve cells.

Research has shown people with depression may have different patterns of signals or different amounts of certain chemicals that result in some messages not being delivered between nerve cells. Chemical changes in the brain can be responsible for depression. Stress may trigger chemical changes in some people. Researchers are continuing to discover why chemical changes occur and how they contribute to symptoms of depression. Remember, depression is a medical illness. Getting professional help is important.

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



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

vhahougeneralquestions@med.va.gov

Question: I received a telephone call the other day and the person asked for my personal information. Is this legitimate?

Answer: Recently, there have been reports of potential telephone scams targeting veterans. In one instance, a caller claiming to be from the VA pharmacy asks for the veteran's Social Security Number and list of medications and dosages. In another scam, the caller targets returning veterans and asks for a Social Security Number. To avoid being a victim of one of these scams, please remember to never give out your Social Security Number or other private data over the phone.

Question: Does VA have a program to help me loose weight?

Answer: VA's *MOVE!* Weight Management Program is designed to help veterans lose weight, keep it off, and improve their health.

MOVE! is an evidence-based, patient-centered weight management program with a comprehensive focus on

behavior, nutrition, and physical activity. For more information about the program ask your health care provider, call the MEDVAMC Nutrition Clinic at (713) 791-1414, ext. 4295, or visit www.move.va.gov.

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.grumer@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 National Veterans Golden Age Games is coming to Houston, August 27-31, 2007. How do I sign up to be a volunteer?

Answer: To volunteer, call MEDVAMC Voluntary Services at (713) 794-7135.

Question: What is a VA service-connected rating and how do I establish one?

Answer: A service-connected rating is an official ruling by VA that your illness/condition is directly related to your active military service. Service-connected ratings are established by the VA Regional Office. In addition to compensation and pension ratings, this office is also responsible for many other benefits. For more information or to apply for any of these benefits, call 1-800-827-1000.

Question: Am I eligible for dental care?

Answer: You are eligible for dental services if your dental care is for either a compensable service-connected condition, a dental condition resulting from service-connected trauma, or if you

have a service-connected rating of 100 percent. You also qualify if you are a former prisoner of war, a participant in a VA vocational rehabilitation program, or if your dental condition is aggravating a medical problem under VA treatment. In addition, you may also qualify for one-time dental treatment if you have been recently discharged from military service, had a documented dental condition while in service, and your discharge certificate does not include certification that all appropriate treatment had been rendered prior to being released.

Question: Am I eligible for Beneficiary Travel Pay?

Answer: The following veterans are eligible for Beneficiary Travel Pay: 1) Veterans rated 30 percent or more service-connected who are traveling for any condition; 2) Veterans rated less than 30 percent, traveling for conditions relating to their service-connected condition; 3) Veterans receiving VA pension benefits for all conditions; 4) Veterans with annual income below the maximum applicable annual rate of pension for all conditions; and 5) Veterans traveling in relation to a Compensation and Pension exam.

Question: What is an Advance Directive and do I need one?

Answer: An Advance Directive is a document you create to control health care decisions if you become mentally or physically unable to make these decisions yourself. Directives to Physicians (known in other states as a "Living Will") let you specify what treatments you would want or not want if there is a terminal or irreversible illness. The Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care lets you appoint someone to make decisions about medical care for you, should you become unable to make

them yourself. Contact your health care provider, nurse, or social worker if you are interested in finding out more.

Question: Is the valet parking at the Houston VA free?

Answer: Free valet parking is available at the MEDVAMC main entrance for veterans. This service operates Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except for federal holidays. A "No Tipping" policy is strictly enforced. This service is extremely valuable for elderly, wheelchair or scooter-bound, and heat-sensitive veterans.

Question: I heard I have to get a new VA I.D. card. Why?

Answer: In order to reduce veteran vulnerability to identity theft, the VA is replacing prior versions of veteran and patient identification cards with a new, more secure one. This new card eliminates the sensitive identifying information printed on the front of the other cards. All veterans enrolled in the VA health care system are strongly encouraged to replace their old cards before July 2007.

Veterans receiving care at the MEDVAMC are able to replace their old cards by stopping by the VIC Room in the Admissions Area near the Emergency Room in Houston, or the check-in desks at the outpatient clinics in Lufkin, Beaumont, Texas City, and Galveston. A clerk at these locations will take the veteran's photograph and the new VIC will be mailed to the veteran in seven to 10 days. Veterans are strongly encouraged to update their contact information including home address and telephone numbers at this time.

For more information, contact the Eligibility and Enrollment Office at (713) 794-7288 or visit the VA's Eligibility Web site at www.va.gov/healtheligibility.

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 ext. 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

**National Salute
to Hospitalized
Veterans Week**

February 11-17, 2007

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

Don't forget to send your Valentine's Day cards and letters to veteran inpatients by mailing them to MEDVAMC, Mailcode: 580/00X, 2002 Holcombe Blvd., Houston, TX 77030.

For more information, call (713) 794-7135.