Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center

VA Star

Vol. 8 No. 2 An Information Guide for the Veterans We Serve in Southeast Texas March/April 2009

Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic • Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic, Lufkin • Conroe VA Outpatient Clinic
Galveston VA Outpatient Clinic • Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic

Galveston Island VA Outpatient Clinic Back on Track

GALVESTON, TX - The Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC) will hold a special Ribbon Cutting Ceremony officially re-opening its VA Outpatient Clinic on Galveston Island. The event will take place on Wednesday, March 4, 2009, 10 a.m. at the new location of 3828 Avenue N, Galveston, Texas 77550.

The event is open to the public, tours will be available, and refreshments will be served. Seating will be limited so guests are encouraged to bring personal lawn chairs.

The new VA Outpatient Clinic is centrally located on Galveston Island near 39th Street close to many restaurants and businesses. The building is newly renovated and the clinic is staffed by highly qualified and experienced VA physicians, nurses, technicians, and administrative staff.

"The re-opening of the VA Outpatient Clinic on Galveston Island fulfills a promise we made to our Veterans after Hurricane Ike," said MEDVAMC Assistant Director Francisco Vazquez, B.S.C.S., M.B.A. "Our goal is to improve Veteran access to high quality health care and we unwaveringly continue to pursue this objective."

The old island clinic, 6115 Avenue L, has been closed since Sept. 13, 2008 when Hurricane Ike slammed ashore causing more than $24 billion in damages in the U.S. coastal and inland areas.

The new Galveston Island clinic, open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. beginning March 4, 2009, will provide primary care, telemedicine, mental health care, phlebotomy, electronic patient records, and women's health services, in addition to local radiology services, to Veterans in the area.

Effective March 4, 2009, Veterans from both Galveston Island and the Mainland will be able to obtain health care at the new Galveston Island VA Outpatient Clinic. Because of contracting issues, the Texas City Community Based Outpatient Clinic at 9300 Emmett Lowry Expressway in Texas City will permanently close on February 27, 2009. The search for an appropriate new location for the Texas City clinic is on-going.

"In the meantime, the 8,400-square-foot island clinic is large enough to accommodate the more than 6,800 area veterans who need care," Vazquez said.

(continued on page 4)

Photo by Bobbi D. Gomez, MEDVAMC Public Affairs Officer

Lydia E. Carrasquillo, R.N., the nurse manager of the new Galveston Island VA Outpatien Clinic, examines Army Veteran Frank Matusek. The new VA Outpatient Clinic is centrall located on Galveston Island near 39th Street. The building is newly renovated and the clinic is staffed by highly qualified and experienced VA physicians, nurses, technicians, and administrative staff. The clinic, open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. – 4:30 p.m., will provide primary care, telemedicine, mental health care, phlebotomy, electronic patient records, and women's health services, in addition to local radiology services, to Veterans in the area.

DeBakey VA Re-Designated Magnet Hospita by American Nurses Credentialing Center

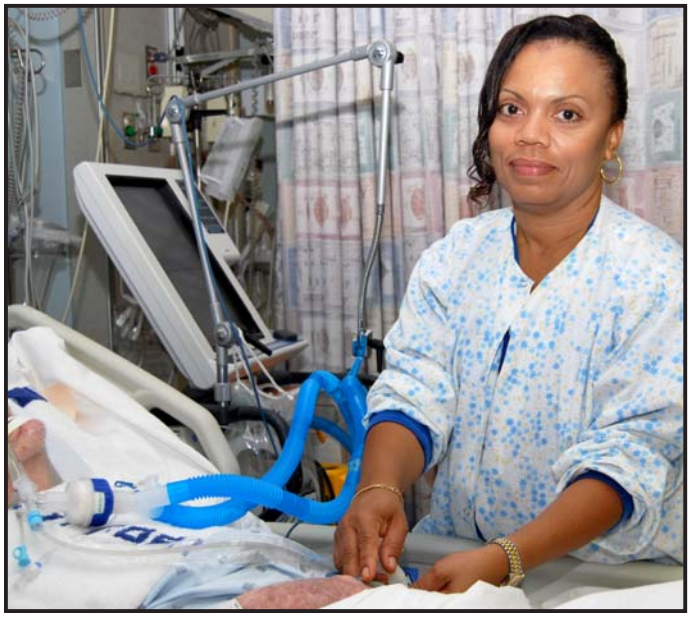


Photo by Bobbi Gomez, MEDVAMC Public Affairs Officer

Operative Care Line Nurse Lisa McGowan, R.N. comforts a patient during Hurricane Ike. The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center is only the second VA medical center in the nation to achieve Magnet recognition for the high quality of care provided to patients.

HOUSTON - On January 14, 2009, the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC), the nation's leading nursing credentialing organization, again granted its Magnet Recognition for Excellence in Nursing Services to the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC)

The MEDVAMC is only the secon VA medical center in the nation to achieve this recognition, and remains in the group of fellow Texas Medical Center facilities with Magnet status, The Methodist Hospital, St. Luke's Episcopa Hospital, Texas Children's Hospital, and The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

"I am elated by the news the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center has again achieved Magnet status," said MEDVAMC Chief Nurse Executive Thelma Gray-Becknell, R.N., M.S.N. "This recognition speaks volumes about the outstanding people and programs we have, and the high quality of care we provide to the Veterans in southeast Texas."

Anticipating the official phone call from ANCC headquarters in

(continued on page 3)

Inside This Issue

Word from the Director
"VA Medical Care: Reality vs. Perception" 2
Houston Again Achieves Low Surgical Mortality Rates 2
Valuable VA Benefit 3
Do You Have PTSD? 3
Transportation Options 4
How Social Workers Help 5
You Are Important Member of Surgical Team 6
Support Group Listing 6
Health Buddy New Technology . 7
Appointment Center 7
Researchers Working on New Way for Bones to Heal 7
American Ex-POW Day Program, April 9, 2009 8

Good News for Previously Ineligible Veterans

See page 3.

Houston VA Again Achieves Consistently Low Surgical Mortality Rates

HOUSTON – The Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC) again has been recognized for demonstrating consistently low observed-to-expected mortality rates in general surgery, all surgery, and all non-cardiac surgery.

"Our observed mortality was one third of expected. We are the only VA to have a statistically low mortality for eight of last nine years." said David H. Berger, M.D., MEDVAMC Operative Care Line executive. "The entire surgical team, including surgeons, anesthesiologists, nurses, and our support staff, should be proud of their hard work in providing consistent, outstanding care to our Veterans."

During the mid-to-late 1980s, the VA came under a great deal of public scrutiny over the quality of surgical care. At issue were the operative mortality rates in the VA hospitals and the perception in Congress that these rates were significantly above the private sector norm. To address the gap, Congress passed a law which mandated the VA report its surgical outcomes annually. This included on a risk-adjusted basis to factor in a patient's severity of illness and compare them to national averages. The only problem was that these "national averages" did not exist.

VA surgeons knew there were no national averages or risk-adjustment models for the various surgical specialties. Looking at their own infrastructure; however, with its advanced information systems and centralized authority and organization of hospitals, they realized they were in a unique position to create these data models.

The success of the initial study encouraged the VA to establish an ongoing program for monitoring and improving the quality of surgical care across all VA medical centers and the National Surgical Quality Improvement Program (NSQIP) was born.

In 1999, the private sector became interested in the NSQIP. Specifically, they wanted to know if the methodology used in the VA hospitals was applicable outside the VA.

In 2001, the American College of Surgeons (ACS) began to take an active interest in the NSQIP and its results in reducing surgical mortality and morbidity rates. The NSQIP functioned very well in the eighteen private sector hospitals and in October of 2002, the Institute of Medicine named the NSQIP the "best in the nation" for measuring and reporting surgical quality and outcomes.

In October 2004 with six years of private sector experience, the effectiveness of the NSQIP was acknowledged as a quality improvement tool and as a source of new clinical knowledge for hospitals outside the VA system. In October of 2004, the College began enrolling new private sector hospitals into the ACS NSQIP. Hospitals can benefit from participating in the ACS NSQIP for many reasons; most importantly, the program can contribute to the reduction of surgical mortality and morbidity. The VA program continues its parallel system and compares its results against the ACS NSQIP private sector data.

"I am very proud the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center has achieved such an important objective," said Blase A. Carabello, M.D., F.A.C.C., MEDVAMC acting director. "Our surgical service staff and its practices are top-notch. I also want to mention the contributions the staff of our Anesthesiology Service has made toward the care and well being of our Veterans. Their role in our Operative Care Line is critical in reducing mortality rates in our medical center. This acknowledgement for continuous surgical excellence is very much earned and deserved. I am pleased we serve as such a positive example for other hospitals both inside and outside the VA health care system."♦

Photo by Mike Lane, MEDVAMC Media Service

The Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center again has been recognized for demonstrating consistently low observed-to-expected mortality rates in general surgery, all surgery, and all non-cardiac surgery. The MEDVAMC is the only VA to have a statistically low mortality for eight of last nine years. Above, David H. Berger, M.D., Operative Care Line executive (right) performs surgery with (from left) Ronnie Blake, health technician, David Chafey, M.D., resident, and Kostas Votanopoulos, M.D., chief resident.

A Word from the Director . . .

VA Medical Care: Reality vs. Perception

HOUSTON - In his book, "*Best Care Anywhere – Why VA Health Care is Better Than Yours,*" Phillip Longman makes the case that the VA has evolved into one of the best, if not the best health care system in the nation. By virtue of any metric of excellence, the care given at VA hospitals does an outstanding job providing those therapies known to improve quality of life and longevity. Honors bestowed upon this particular VA, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, include the Robert W. Carey Organizational Excellence Award for being the best of the best; re-designation for Magnet Recognition for Excellence in Nursing Services for the superiority of our nursing program; and recognition of our surgical program as the best in the VA system for 8 years running.

So, if we're doing such a darn good job, why are only 75 percent of our patients satisfied with the job we're doing? While our percentage is not a terrible track record, it does not compare with many local private hospitals that provide documented worse medical care.

The problem is not that we do not care; far from it. Most of our employees work here because they are dedicated to Veterans and want to do a good job. A great many are Veterans themselves or have family members who are Veterans. The problem is that we have failed to actively show our valued patients a sense of caring and compassion. Long wait times, poor communication, discourtesy by a tiny minority of staff, a cumbersome telephone system, and a difficult-to-navigate building are some of the problems we must overcome. When problems are identified, too often it takes weeks or even months for us to even acknowledge the issue.

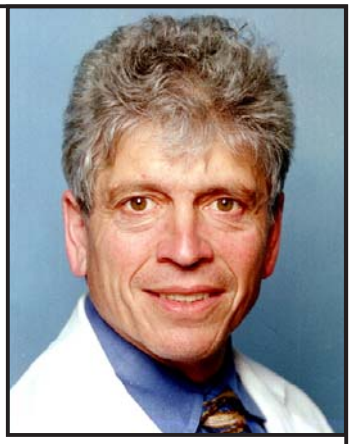
THIS MUST AND WILL CHANGE!! We are developing a Service Recovery Program that responds quickly to resolve our patients' problems. A system that demonstrates effectively to our patients that we do care and we are sorry for any inconvenience, aggravation, or frustration when it occurs. It will provide proof we are sincere and genuine.

The following steps will be implemented in the future. First, the "Speak to Director" program will be replaced by a "Share Your Experience" initiative where concerns will be addressed within five days using the telephone, whenever possible, instead of time-consuming mail.

Second, when we do foul up, individual employees will be empowered to remedy a situation on the spot with minimal supervisory involvement. Specific, concrete remedies such as personal apologies, arranging to quickly reschedule a service, and various types of reparations will be offered to the inconvenienced Veteran.

Third, every clinic, department, and unit will have a Veterans' champion, a specific person dedicated to helping the patient with his/her concerns right on the spot. A photo of the Veterans' champion will be posted in the area along with his or her contact information. Finally, we will double the staff in our appointment center so that calls are answered promptly and appointments can be confirmed, or cancelled and rescheduled within two minutes.

This is not a matter of dollars and cents; it is a matter of taking pride and ownership of a Veteran's concerns and turning the situation into a positive experience for that patient. The VA is the best health care system in the United States. Very soon, it IS going to feel like it to our patients.♦



Blase A. Carabello, M.D., F.A.C.C.
Acting Medical Center Director

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An Overlooked, but Valuable VA Benefit: Houston VA National Cemetery

HOUSTON - The Houston VA National Cemetery, located at 10410 Veterans Memorial Drive, 15 miles northwest of downtown, is the second largest national cemetery in the region, encompassing some 419 acres of a former dairy farm in northwest Houston. Presently, approximately 213 acres have been developed of the land that was purchased in 1963.

The cemetery's focal point and th site of all special observances is the horseshoe-shaped building at its center known as the Hemicycle. This exposed aggregate structure contains a chapel and a 75-foot bell tower, and encloses a courtyard that can accommodate as many as 2,500 people.

Since opening in 1965, the Houston VA National Cemetery is the 11th most active of the 125 national cemeteries with present burial rate at eight per day, five days a week. It is projected to have burial space available until the year 2030.

Burial in any national cemetery is available to all Veterans with a general or better discharge, their spouses, dependent children, and under certain conditions to unmarried adult children. Eligible Veterans may receive a VA grave marker or headstone even if they are not buried in a national cemetery.

"I encourage all Veterans, dependents, and friends to be aware of all available VA benefits," said Jorge Lopez, director, Houston VA National Cemetery. "We strive to serve all Veterans and their families with the utmost dignity, respect, and compassion."

Each year, the cemetery hosts several special events to express appreciation for the past, present, and future sacrifices of our nation's Veterans and their families. This past December, the Houston VA National Cemetery again participated in the nation-wide "*Wreaths Across America*" campaign. The goal of this event is to place as many wreaths as possible on the headstones of our nation's heroes.

"We invite all members of the community to visit, participate, or volunteer for one of our special events. The Houston VA National Cemetery is a unique place that inspires young and old to understand and appreciate the service and sacrifice of our nation's Veterans," said Lopez.

For more information about burial or memorial benefits or to have a copy of the VA Pamphlet *"Interments in National Cemeteries"* mailed to you, call (281) 447-8686, ext 200. You may also visit the National Cemetery Administration Web site at *www.cem.va.gov*. There is also a national gravesite locator available there.♦ *Jose Henriquez, Houston VA National Cemetery*

Photo provided by Houston VA National Cemetery

Jorge Lopez, director, Houston VA National Cemetery (right) and Edgar L. Tucker, the former director of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, place a wreath during Memorial Day Service at the Houston VA National Cemetery.

VA Re-Designated Nursing Magnet Hospital

(continued from page 1)

Washington D. C. announcing the Magnet designation, Gray-Becknell arranged for the call to be broadcast in the facility's auditorium so all MEDVAMC nursing staff could hear the results and share the recognition.

Magnet is the highest honor a health care organization can receive for nursing services. ANCC has conferred this national designation on some of the country's most prestigious institutions, including the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota and Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. The Magnet program was developed to recognize health care organizations that provide the best in quality patient care and uphold excellence in professional nursing practice.

Independent studies of Magnet hospitals have shown that patients average a shorter length of stay and higher rate of satisfaction, nurses are more satisfied with their work and the care they provide, and hospitals have an increased rate of retention among nurses.

Indeed, the registered nurse (RN) vacancy rate at the MEDVAMC is 3.5 percent. This number is remarkable when compared to the results of the 2002 American Health Care Association Nursing Position Vacancy and Turnover Survey, which found nationwide, the vacancy rates among staff RNs averaged 15 percent.

To receive the ANCC's Magnet designation, a team of professionals appraises a hospital's nursing services, clinical outcomes, and patient care. Research data and extensive interviews are used to evaluate the nursing practice and how practices impact the patient, family, community, and nursing services.♦

OEF/OIF Veterans: Do you have symptoms of Trauma?

Some symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder:

- **Feelings of detachment from people**
- **Difficulty falling or staying asleep**
- **Irritability or angry outbursts**
- **Difficulty concentrating**
- **Startling easily**
- **Nightmares or flashbacks about a traumatic event**
- **Avoidance of things that remind you of the event**

The Michael E. DeBakey is (MEDVAMC) is conducting research on a new, brief treatment for Veterans with symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The treatment involves two visits to the MEDVAMC, at-home writing sessions, and telephone calls from the researchers. If you are eligible, you may receive this treatment for free and *be paid* if you complete the treatment.

If you have some or all of the symptoms listed above and you *served in the military after January 1, 2006*, please contact Alexandra Shepherd at *Alexandra.shepherd@va.gov* or (713) 794-8821 to receive more information.

MICHAEL E. DeBAKEY VETERANS AFFAIRS MEDICAL CENTER

VA To Offer Health Care to Previously Ineligible Veterans

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced on January 8, 2009 plans to re-open enrollment in its health care system by July 2009 to about 265,000 Veterans whose incomes exceed current limits.

The change affects Veterans whose incomes exceed the current VA means test and geographic means test income thresholds by 10 percent or less. Congress provided funds in VA's fiscal year 2009 budget to support the new enrollment.

In 1996, Congress established a priority-based enrollment system for VA and a uniform package of medical benefits for all enrollees. The legislation opened enrollment in VA's health care system to all eligible Veterans and required that each yea the Secretary of Veterans Affairs assess Veterans' demand for services and determine if the necessary resources are available to provide timely, quality care to all enrollees.

Enrollment for the lowest priority of the eight groups—Veterans who are not being compensated for a military-related disability and who have incomes above a set threshold—was suspended on January 18, 2003, although Veterans in that priority group who were already enrolled for care were permitted to remain enrolled.

VA originally suspended enrollment for Priority 8 Veterans because it was unable to provide all enrolled Veterans with timely access to its health care due to a tremendous growth in the number of Veterans then seeking enrollment. VA now plans to reopen enrollment for a portion of these Veterans without compromising the Department's ability to provide hig quality health care services to all enrolled Veterans who are eligible for care.

VA's computer systems are being modified to accommodate the changes, and the Department is preparing communication and education materials to ensure that Congress, Veterans service organizations, and the public are aware of the coming changes.

The rule will take effect by June 30, 2009 and the VA will continue to monitor wait times to ensure the quality of care is not adversely affected.

For more information about eligibility and enrollment, visit www.va.gov/healtheligibility. An Enrollment Calculator is also available there to help Veterans determine their potential eligibilit for VA health care services under the proposed regulation.♦

Acting Director of Houston VA Receives Distinguished Scientist Award from ACC

HOUSTON – Blase A. Carabello, M.D., F.A.C.C, acting director of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, recently was selected to receive the Distinguished Scientist Award from the American College of Cardiology (ACC) the college's most prestigious researc honor.

ACC was chartered and incorporated as a teaching institution in 1949, and established its headquarters, called Heart House, in Bethesda, Maryland in 1977. The mission of the American College of Cardiology is to advocate for quality cardiovascular care — through education, research promotion, development and application of standards and guidelines — and to influence health care policy.

Listed as one of the best doctors in the nation in the field of cardiovascular disease in 2008 by the medical knowledge company, Best Doctors, Inc., Carabello, who has worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs for 24 years, received his medical degree from Temple University in 1973 and completed his internal medicine residency and cardiology fellowship at Harvard Medical School in 1978.

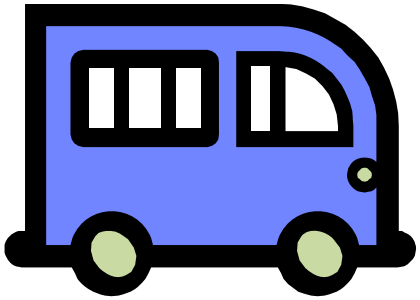
A former chairperson of the Program Committee of the Council on Clinical Cardiology and a member of the Committee on Scientific Sessions of the American Heart Association, Carabello is the Moncrief Professor of Medicine and vice chairman in the Department of Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine and a founding member and immediate past president of the Society for Heart Valve Disease. He also holds memberships in the American Society for Clinical Investigation and the American Federation for Clinical Research.

Since 2001, Carabello has served as a member of the Cardio/Renal Advisory Committee for the Food and Drug Administration in Washington, D.C. He is on the editorial board and serves as an editorial consultant of a number of peer-reviewed journals including the Journal of the *American College of Cardiology*, the *Journal of Heart Valve Disease*, *Journal of Cardiac Failure*, and *Current Cardiology Reports*.

Photo by Bobbi Gomez, MEDVAMC Public Affairs Officer

From left, Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center Acting Director Blase A. Carabello, M.D., F.A.C.C. confers with Medical Center Deputy Chief of Staff James W. Scheurich, M.D. and Medical Center Associate Chief Nurse Lottie Lockett, R.N., M.S., N.E.A.-B.C. during a recent meeting. Listed as one of the best doctors in the nation in the field of cardiovascular disease by the medical knowledge company, Best Doctors, Inc., Carabello received his medical degree from Temple University in 1973 and completed his internal medicine residency and cardiolog fellowship at Harvard Medical School in 1978.

Carabello is the author of more than 350 peer-reviewed and invited publications and the recipient of numerous awards for excellence in teaching. Also, he received the 2003 Alumnus of the Year Award from Temple University and in 2007, selected as the president of the Association of University Cardiologists, completing his term in January of 2009. ♦



Transportation to VA Appointments

Transportation to and from the MEDVAMC in Houston from outlying areas is available by way of vans operated by various veteran service organizations and local government offices. 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. Please leave your name and telephone number if you reach voice mail.

Transportation to and from the MEDVAMC in Houston:

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 Service (713) 696-1985
Lufkin Bus (936) 633-2740
Montgomery County Vans (936) 756-5828
Willis Van (936) 856-5224
Woodville/Tyler County Van (409) 283-2493

Transportation to and from the Texas City Outpatient Clinic
Baytown, Channelview, Deer Park & Pasadena Van (281) 452-6071

Transportation to and from the Conroe Outpatient Clinic:
Friendship Center Van (936) 756-5828

Local Montgomery County Transportation: 1 (800) 272-0039

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 St., 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.

Galveston Island VA Outpatient Clinic Reopens

(continued on page 1)

Veterans, who need medical advice, appointments, or other information, are asked to call the VA Network Telecare Center Hotline at (713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1-800-639-5137. Registered nurses, pharmacists, and administrative clerks are ready to answer Veteran health care questions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Veterans with life-threatening emergencies should immediately call 911♦.

How VA Social Workers Help Veterans Cope

HOUSTON - You will find social workers ready to help you in all program areas at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC). If you have questions or problems, a social worker may be able to help you or refer you to the right person or department for help.

Social workers provide support in obtaining financial or housing assistance; getting help from the VA or from community agencies, such as Meals on Wheels, so you can continue to live in your own home; and applying for benefits from the VA, Social Security Administration, and other government and community programs.

They also ensure your doctor and all the VA staff on your treatment team clearly understand your decisions about end-of-life issues or advance directives, and living wills. These decisions affect whether you want to be on life support equipment, if you want to be an organ donor, and who can make decisions when you are physicially or mentally unable to make those decisions yourself.

Social workers may arrange for respite care when your caregiver needs to be away; develop a plan for improved mental, physical, and emotional functioning; assist if you are having marriage or family problems; help with moving to an assisted living facility, a boarding and care home, or a nursing home; and provide grief counseling.

In addition, they can help you if you believe your drinking or drug use is becoming a problem in your life, if you feel someone is taking advantage of you, if you feel mistreated in a relationship, if you are a parent who feels overwhelmed with child care, if your parent or spouse is in failing health, if you are feeling stress because of your health or because your medical condition interferes with your daily activities, or if you are feeling sad, depressed, or anxious.

Social work services are offered to Veterans from all military eras and units. No matter your age or military experience, social workers are here to serve you.

Assessment

The first step, generally, is for the social worker to meet with you, and often with your family. The social worker will ask questions about your health, your living situation, your family and other support systems, your military experience, and the things you think you need help with. The social worker will then write an assessment to help you and your VA health care team make treatment plans.

Crisis intervention

In a crisis situation, social workers provide counseling services to help you get through the crisis. The social worker will then help you with more long-term needs. She or he will help you apply for services and programs in your community and through the VA to meet emergent needs.

High-risk screening

Social workers work particularly closely with high risk Veterans, such as those who are homeless, those who have been admitted to the hospital several times, and those who cannot care for themselves.

Discharge planning

When you are admitted to a VA hospital, the social worker will help you make plans for your discharge back to your home or to another place in the community. If you need services in your home or if you can no longer live at home by yourself, he or she can help you make arrangements for the help you need.

Photo by Bobbi Gomez, MEDVAMC Public Affairs Officer

Social Worker Maria Lozano-Vasquez consults with Army Veteran Bobby Armstrong. You will find social workers ready to help you in all program areas at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. If you have questions or problems, a social worker may be able to help you or refer you to the right person or department for help.

Case management

Social workers often provide long-term case management services to Veterans who are at high risk of being admitted to a hospital, have very complex medical problems, and need additional help and support. They are available when needed to provide and coordinate a variety of services you may need, including counseling or support services or just helping you figure out what you need and how to get it.

Advocacy

Sometimes it can be hard for a Veteran to speak up for himself or herself. Sometimes, Veterans are confused by a big, bureaucratic organization like the VA. Social workers can represent you when you do not feel comfortable with the situation or have a hard time explaining yourself.

Education

Social workers can help educate you and your family about your health care condition, what services and programs are available to you, how you can live a more healthy life, how you can deal with stress and loss, and how you can find support groups and other self-help programs in your community. Social workers also educate other staff in the medical center and in the community about VA programs and services and about how problems Veterans may have in their personal lives can negatively impact their health.

Psychotherapy

Clinical social workers provide individual therapy, group therapy, and family therapy to address emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs.

VA social workers can help you wit all of these types of services, plus many, many more. If you have a problem or a question, just ask to talk to the social worker on your unit or in your clinic.

Social workers are assigned to every unit, clinic, and program at the MEDVAMC. Just tell your doctor, nurse, or clinic/unit clerk that you would like to see a social worker. They can either direct you to the social worker's office or contact them for you.♦

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The Patient: You Are An Important Member of Your Surgical Team

HOUSTON - Even though you have the best surgeon in the nation and are in a highly reputable medical center - your safety depends on you taking an active part in your care. There have been many reports about incorrect surgery being performed, or even surgery on the wrong person. It sounds frightening, but there are ways you can stop this from happening.

First, you should review all the information on the consent form before you sign it. You, or your legal guardian, must sign the consent form before any surgery can take place. It should be written in words you can plainly understand. If it is not or you are not sure of something, ask your doctors and nurses questions until you have the answers you want.

It is very important to tell your health care providers about all the medicines you are taking and any allergies you may have. Write down this information and show it to your doctor.

Next, don't think your doctor or nurse is being forgetful when they ask you to state your name and what procedure you are having - this helps prevent communication errors. Many close calls have occurred when patients with similar names arrive on the same day for the same procedure. With the fast pace of the admission area combined with pre-surgery jitters, it is easy to answer to the wrong name. Question anything that does not sound right to you - even if it is something like your doctor's name.

If your surgeon confirms which knee is to be operated on and then proceeds to make an X with a marker, don't think it is a question of short-term memory problems. This assures all members of the operating team members have the same information.

Check to make sure the mark does not rub off. This mark will be very important for the doctors and nurses to see while you are asleep during your surgery. Tell your doctor or nurse if the mark rubs or washes off before the surgery.

More than one person will ask you the same questions. There are a series of checkpoints in place to assure your safety. A time-out will be performed by all the team members to make sure everyone is in agreement on the right patient, the right procedure, and which side of the body is involved.

The *New England Journal of Medicine* recently reported if all private hospitals used the same checklist that helps doctors and nurses avoid errors as the VA, they could save tens of thousands of lives and $20 billion in medical costs each year.

Be sure you understand instructions both prior to and after the surgery. Call the telephone number provided on your discharge instructions if you get home and something does not seem right. And, as always, have a relative or friend act as your second set of eyes and ears to help understand what to do before and after your surgery.

Finally, as health care professionals at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, we are committed to providing you the best care in a safe manner. We want you to partner with us.

The Joint Commission has published many brochures to help patients get involved in their own care. You can find them at *www.jointcommission.org PatientSafety/SpeakUp/*. ♦ *Maureen Dicker, RN, MS, CHE, Network 18 Patient Safet Officer*

Photo by Bobbi Gruner, Public Affairs Officer

(From left) Shellie Tingle, R.N., M.B.A., Operative Care Line Quality manager; Mariamma Geevarghese, R.N., staff nurse; and Santhamma John, R.N., staff nurse comfort U.S. Marine Veteran Joe Phillips, Jr. after surgery. It is important to remember you play a key role on your surgical team. Ask questions and speak up if you do not understand something.

Support Group Listing

Support groups can be extremely helpful when coping with an injury or illness. Talk with a social worker on your nursing unit or in your Primary Care Clinic about available support groups, meeting times, and locations.

Vet to Vet Support Group
Meets every Wednesday, 6 p.m., Room 6B-117; every Thursday, 9 a.m., 6B-117; and every Thursday, 11 a.m., Room 6C-166. Veteran facilitator. POC for more information: Sara Allison, (713) 791-1414, ext. 2328 or Cristy Gamez-Galka, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4378

Parkinson's Disease Education/ Support Group
Contact facilitators for information: Naomi Nelson, (713) 794-8938 & Lisa Whipple, (713) 794-7951

Cancer Support Group
Meets 2nd Tuesday every month, 2-3 p.m., Cancer Center Family Room, Room 4C-365. Facilitators: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, (713) 791-1414, ext. 5273 & 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

Amputee Support Group
Meets 4th Wednesday every month, 3 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Dining Room. Facilitators: Betty Baer, (713) 794-7793 & Stacy Flynn, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4441

Stroke Support Group
Meets 3rd Tuesday every month, 3 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Day Room. Facilitator: Lisa Whipple, (713) 794-7951

Hepatitis C Support Group
Meets 1st Friday every month, 1:30 p.m., Primecare Clinic 5. Facilitators: Garfield Norris, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6189 & Jodi M. Francis, (713) 791-1414, ext. 3394

Mended Hearts (Heart Disease) Support Group
Meets 3rd Thursday every month, 11 a.m., Nursing Unit 2A Dining Room. Facilitators: Patricia Suarez, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6101 & Rosa Lane-Smith, ext. 4034

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

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

Pain Coping Skills Training Group
Meets every Tuesday, 1 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

Depression and Bipolar Disorder Support Group
Meets every Monday, 8:30 a.m., Room 6B-111. (713) 600-1131

HIV Support/Educational Group
Meets every Tuesday, 2 p.m., Clinic 4, Room 1A-442. Facilitator: Cindy Grant, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6867 & Belinda Rainer, ext. 5292

Breast Cancer Survivors Support Group
Meets last Tuesday every month, 12 noon, Education Conference Room, 4th Floor, Room 4A-380H. Facilitators: Magdalena Ramirez (713) 791-1414, ext. 5287

Prostate Cancer Support Group
Meets 3rd Wednesday every month, 10 a.m., Cancer Center Conference Room, 4C-345. Facilitators: Tonjala Seals, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6227

Fibromylgia Education & Support Group
Contact facilitator for information: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center
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New, Revamped VA Web Site: www.houston.va.gov

"Health Buddy" Technology Prods Veterans to Live a Healthier Lifestyle

HOUSTON – Veterans with chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and heart failure can be monitored at home using special telehealth technologies provided to them by the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC).

The Health Buddy is a simple piece of equipment similar to an answering machine that can be placed anywhere in the Veteran's home where there is a power outlet and a working telephone jack. It is friendly, convenient, and easy to use.

Specific questions about the Veteran and his illness are programmed into the Health Buddy. The Veteran simply answers the questions each day. Information obtained such as blood pressure and blood glucose, along with other patient information in the electronic system, allows his or her care coordinator to anticipate and prevent avoidable problems. Coordinators monitor the information daily and contact the patient for any medication adjustments or schedule any appointments necessary to keep the Veteran as healthy as possible.

"The ultimate goal of the program is to work with each Veteran to teach him how to improve his quality of life. Motivation and enthusiasm on the Veteran's part is a key factor to success," said Omana Simon, F.N.P.-B.C., Care Coordination/Home Telehealth coordinator. "Our oldest participatin Veteran is 90 years old."

The Health Buddy does not replace routine medical appointments; rather it simply enhances primary care. The new technology has become increasingl popular with Veterans because it provides greater access to medical care. Veterans take a more active role in their well-being and have peace of mind knowing their health care providers have up-to-date information in order to adjust their medical care. They know someone is looking out for their welfare.

"The coordinators motivate you to live a better life and lifestyle. They monitor, follow-up, and lovingly "prod you to do better. I am living a healthier life because of this program," said Arm Veteran James Leonard.

Since MEDVAMC began the Care Coordination/Home Telehealth program in December 2005, 499 Veterans have enrolled in the program with 294 Veterans currently actively usin the system.♦ *Frances M. Burke, Public Affairs Specialist*

Photo by Frances Burke, Public Affairs Specialist

Care Coordinators Crystal Tabangay, R.N., B.S.N. (left) and Omana Simon, F.N.P.-B.C. discuss the benefits of the Health Buddy with Marine Veteran Alonzo Pouncy. Veterans with chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and heart failure can be monitored at home using special telehealth technologies provided to them by the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center.

VA Payments to Surviving Spouses

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The VA recently announced actions to identify and pay surviving spouses who are eligible to receive a compensation or pension for the month of the veteran's death.

Problems in VA's implementation of a change in law effective in 1997 resulted in some surviving spouses not receivin the veteran's compensation or pension payment for the month of death.

A special task force was formed to identify and pay the beneficiaries who never received the benefit or were inadvertently required to repay the money issued for the month of a Veteran's death.

Surviving spouses most likely to be affected by this processing problem are those who never applied to VA for survivors' benefits following the death of a veteran.

The task force is in the process of reviewing VA's payment records for Veterans who died after December 31, 1996, and who are survived by a spouse. The review will identify those to whom VA owes retroactive benefits for the month of the veteran's death.

Payments will continue as additional unpaid beneficiaries are identified and VA is able to obtain current address information.

Because there are deceased Veterans for whom VA does not have information, a special Survivors' Call Center has been established. Call toll-free 1-800-749-8387 or visit *www.vba.va.gov/survivorsbenefit.htm* on the Internet. ♦

Appointment Center

The Appointment Center provides you with one telephone number to cancel or reschedule any clinic appointment you may have at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston:

1-800-639-5137

NEW!! Operating Hours:
Monday – Friday, 6 am – 8 pm

VA Researchers To Create New Way For Bones To Heal

HOUSTON – If you have not broken a bone, you probably know someone who has. Researchers at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) have challenged themselves to create and develop "fracture putty," a new material that speeds the healing of bone in severe fractures.

With a two-year, nearly $4.5 million contract from the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, a consortium of researchers led by the MEDVAMC and its major affiliate Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) are tackling this project.

Current treatments for severely broken bones require bone screws, plates, and rods that help healing but often require very long healing times, and can lead to further complications. Through this new fracture putty, researchers hope to develop a nontoxic putty-like material that, when placed at the site of a severe fracture, provides immediate support, and also promotes the rapid formation of new bone. The material should also degrade over time as normal bone regenerates.

The multidisciplinary and multi-institutional team, led by principal investigator Michael Heggeness, M.D., a staff physician in the Operative Care Line at MEDVAMC and chair of orthopedic surgery at BCM, is one of three groups selected to take on this challenge.

"Our hope is to create a process that would put a stop to the many amputations that too often follow these injuries. We are developing a new treatment that would be implemented quickly and efficiently after such an injury," said Heggeness. "Our exceptional group includes world renowned experts in the fields of molecular biology, biomechanical engineering, tissue engineering, imaging, and orthopedic surgery."

Traumatic battlefield wounds such as compound bone fracture are very difficult to treat, often requiring multiple surgeries, long healing, and rehabilitation times. Amputations are not uncommon. Fracture putty represents the ultimate convergence of materials science, mechanics, and orthopedics to speed recovery with with fewer complications.

Researchers plan to use bone morphogenic protein producing cells, combined with an innovative gel, to develop a treatment that will facilitate bone growth and provide structural support at the same time.

Other investigators who will take part in this study include Francis Gannon, M.D., MEDVAMC staff physician; Alan Davis, Ph.D., Elizabeth Olmstead-Davis, Ph.D., and John Hipp, Ph.D., all of BCM; Eva Sevick, Ph.D. , The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston; and Steven Stice, Ph.D.; John Peroni, Ph.D. of the University of Georgia: and Jennifer West, Ph.D., professor and chair of bioengineering at Rice University.♦ *Dipali Pathak, Office of Public Affairs, Baylor College of Medicine*

Veterans' Questions

Answers provided by Consumer Affairs Room 1B-270 (713) 794-7884 or email vhahougeneralquestions@va.gov

Question: I heard the VA had another travel reimbursement increase. Is this true?
Answer: Service-disabled and low-income Veterans who are reimbursed for travel expenses while receiving care at VA facilities should have seen an increase in their payments beginning January 9, 2009.

A recently passed law allowed VA to cut the amount it must withhold from their mileage reimbursement. The deductible amount is now $3 for each one-way trip and $6 for each round trip — with a calendar cap of $18, or six one-way trips or three round trips, whichever comes first. The previous deductible was $7.77 for a one-way trip, and $15.54 for a round trip, with a calendar cap of $46.62.

In November 2008, VA announced VA's second increase in the mileage reimbursement rate during 2008, from 28.5 cents to 41.5 cents a mile.

Service-disabled and low-income Veterans are eligible to be reimbursed by VA for the travel costs of receivin health care or counseling at VA facilities. Veterans traveling for Compensation and Pension examinations also qualify for mileage reimbursement. VA can waive deductibles if they cause financial hardship.

Veterans living in southeast Texas who have questions may call (713) 794-7897 or send an e-mail to *erick.smith@va.gov*.

Question: Sometimes my VA check gets delayed or lost in the mail. How can I get this fixed?
Answer: Every month, 730,000 Veterans or survivors look for their compensation, pension checks, or educational assistance payments in their mailboxes. Nearly all receive them, but theft and mail delays cause problems for some Veterans. This can be prevented by using direct deposit.

VA urges those Veterans and family members now receiving paper checks to join nearly 3.1 million others whose VA payments are safely deposite electronically.

There are several easy ways to sign up for direct deposit — calling VA toll-free at (800) 333-1795 or enrolling online at *www.GoDirect.org*.

Veterans, and family members who receive VA payments, also can sign u by contacting the Houston VA Regiona Office at 1 (800) 827-1000.

Information about direct deposit will be included in VA's monthly compensation and pension envelopes throughout 2009.

Direct deposits relieve worry about mail delivery being delayed by severe weather or natural disasters. The deposits also eliminate trips to banks or credit unions to deposit checks, while providing immediate access to money at the same time each month.

Question: How do I get more VA news and information?
Answer: Send an e-mail to *bobbi.gruner@va.gov* to sign up to receive news releases and information. You can also visit *www.houston.va.gov* and click on the "News Center" symbol.

Question: Where is smoking allowed at the Houston VA?
Answer: In general, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center is a smoke free facility. The designated smoking area is the ground floor terrace facing Old Spanish Trail.

Question: What do I do if I am running out of my medication?
Answer: Your provider will make sure you have enough refills to last until your next appointment. If you find you are running out of medication and have no refills left, please contact your Prime Care Team or VA Network Telecare Center at (713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1 (800) 639-5137.

Question: Who pays for my hearing aids and eyeglasses?
Answer: Hearing aids and eyeglasses generally require a service-connected disability rating of 10% or more. Nonservice-connected Veterans with a pension, housebound Veterans, and aid & attendance Veterans are also eligible. Hearing aids and eyeglasses are usually not provided to nonservice-connected Veterans for generally occurring hearin or vision loss.

Question: I couldn't find a parking space and was late for my appointment. What is being done to fix this problem?
Answer: Parking on VA grounds is restricted to employees, patients, and their family members or visitors. All others will be ticketed or towed. If you see someone you believe should not be parking on the VA campus, please take the license number and notify the VA Police at (713) 794-7106 immediately.

Free valet parking is available at the main entrance for our Veterans. This service operates Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except for federal holidays. A "No Tipping" sign is posted at the main entrance and this policy is strictly enforced.

Question: Is it okay to ask my doctor or nurse to wash their hands?
Answer: Yes, make sure health care providers clean their hands or wear gloves. Doctors, nurses, dentists, and other health care providers come into contact with lots of bacteria and viruses. So before they treat you, ask them if they have cleaned their hands. Health care providers should wear clean gloves when they perform tasks such as taking throat cultures, taking blood, touching wounds or body fluids, and examining any part of your body.

Important VA Telephone Numbers

Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center ..... (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
Conroe VA Outpatient Clinic ..... (936) 522-4000
or toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 1979
Galveston Island VA Outpatient Clinic ..... (409) 761-3200
(Number active on Tuesday, March 3, 2009)
Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic ..... Call Galveston Island VA Outpatient Clinic for assistance.
Pharmacy Refills ..... (713) 794-7648
or toll-free 1-800-454-1062
Pharmacy Helpline ..... (713) 794-7653
Suicide Prevention Hotline ..... toll-free 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
Appointment Center ..... toll-free 1-800-639-5137
Automated Appointment Information ..... (713) 794-7648
or toll-free 1-800-454-1062
VA Eligibility & Enrollment ..... (713) 794-7288
Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program ..... (713) 794-7848
Homeless Veterans Drop-In Center (1418 Preston St.) .. (713) 794-7533

Operations Enduring Freedom & Iraqi Freedom Support Team
Team Members ..... (713) 794-7034/8825/7928

Vet Center (701 N. Post Oak Road) ..... (713) 682-2288
Vet Center (2990 Richmond Ave.) ..... (713) 523-0884

Patient Advocates
Houston/Texas City ..... (713) 794-7884
Beaumont ..... 1-800-833-7734, ext. 113
Conroe ..... (936) 522-4010, ext. 1952
Lufkin ..... (936) 633-2753

Houston VA National Cemetery ..... (281) 447-8686

VA Regional Office ..... (713) 383-1999
or toll-free 1-800-827-1000

Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center's

American Ex-POW Day Program

Honoring Our Nation's Former Prisoners of War

April 9, 2009 – 10 a.m., 4th Floor Auditorium

Keynote Speaker: Ken Wallingford
Former Prisoner of War, Vietnam

While serving as an United States military advisor to 200 South Vietnamese troops on April 5, 1972 at Loc Ninh, South Vietnam, Wallingford and four other Americans came under heavy fire from three divisions of North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong soldiers. After two and a half days of fighting, the numerically superior enemy overran his camp. Severely wounded, Wallingford was one of three survivors taken prisoner. He spent the next ten months in a five-foot by six-foot "tiger cage" and was one of the first two Texans to return home following the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement.

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