



## Data Security Contracts Highlight New Age of Vulnerability

In August, the VA announced two agreements with information technology companies to help ensure that the private health and personal information of its veterans are safeguarded. These agreements come in the wake of several incidents over the past four months that drew attention to weaknesses in the VA's data security.

In May, a VA-owned laptop containing the names, social security numbers, and birth dates of 26.5 million veterans was stolen. That laptop was later recovered, but a second theft on August 7, this time of a laptop containing information on nearly 20,000 patients from VA facilities in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, PA, occurred in the Virginia office of a VA subcontractor. According to Associated Press reports, the VA also has confirmed losing sensitive data for more than 16,000 veterans in Minneapolis, MN and Indianapolis, IN. These incidents elicited outrage from members of Congress, with major news outlets reporting that some Senate Democrats have called for the resignation of VA Secretary R. James Nicholson.

In the first of the two agreements, reported on August 9, ID Analytics (San Diego, CA) will examine data files from the May theft and provide quarterly monitoring services to the VA—for free. If, in comparing the VA files against its network of more than three billion identity elements, the company finds any evidence of “organized misuse” it will notify the VA as well as law enforcement.

On August 14, the VA awarded a \$3.7 million contract to Systems Made

Simple Inc. (Syracuse, NY), a business owned by a veteran with a service-connected disability, to provide encryption software for the VA's laptops, desktop computers, and other data storage devices (such as flash drives and compact discs). The VA plans to have every laptop encrypted by mid September.

The VA isn't the only federal agency to join forces with corporations in the private sector to protect and modernize their data systems. On July 12, Analex Corporation (Fairfax, VA) announced a contract of up to \$15.3 million with the IHS to provide network operations and information security services for the health care system's 600 hospitals, clinics, and other facilities. Under an initial contract worth \$10.7 million, Analex will staff a network center to monitor information and data security for all IHS facilities. In a second contract worth up to \$4.6 million, Analex will work directly with the IHS to scan the system for susceptibility to security infringements, provide security incident and event handling, and conduct virtual attacks on the network to test its protection.

## VA Researcher Studies Irradiated *Listeria* Vaccine

Joshua Fierer, MD, chief of the infectious diseases section at the VA San Diego Healthcare System and professor of medicine at the University of California, San Diego, is one of the investigators spearheading early research on a vaccine that uses gamma-irradiated *Listeria monocytogenes* to protect against infection. The study results suggest that this type of vaccine may produce a broader, more effective

immune response than vaccines that use heat- or chemical-killed bacteria.

In the study, which was supported by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID) and published in the July issue of the journal *Immunity*, the researchers administered the irradiated vaccine twice to a group of 10 mice. Another 10 mice received two inoculations with a heat-killed vaccine, while a third group of 10 received no vaccine. Twenty-eight days after the initial vaccination, all mice were exposed to live *Listeria* (four times the amount needed to kill 50% of unvaccinated, infected animals). All subjects given the heat-killed vaccine or no vaccine died, while 80% of the mice given the irradiated vaccine survived. Follow-up studies demonstrated that protection lasted 12 months after the initial vaccination.

While vaccines made with live bacteria generally produce the broadest immune response, it can be difficult to attenuate the bacteria to the point at which they effectively activate the immune response without causing illness. In addition, live vaccines must be refrigerated, making them difficult to transport and to access in certain critical situations, such as a bioterrorist attack. The irradiated vaccine, on the other hand, can be freeze-dried into a powder, making it easier to transport and preserve.

The researchers believe this method of vaccine generation possibly could be applied to other bacterial vaccine candidates, such as typhoid, cholera, and tuberculosis. According to NIAID Director Anthony S. Fauci, MD, the researchers “have opened the possibility of making a variety of bacterial vaccines that combine the best features of both killed-agent and live, attenuated vaccines.”

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## VA Announces Upcoming Facility Modernization Projects

This summer, the VA announced a series of plans for construction and renovation of health care facilities across the nation. These projects are part of the National Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Initiative, which aims to optimize the VA's use of its physical space and modernize its facilities to meet current and future needs. In the case of several sites, former VA Secretary Anthony J. Principi's 2004 CARES decision involved closer examination of the logistic, financial, social, and public health implications of various options for consolidation, renovation, or new construction. These investigations incorporated input from stakeholders, including veterans and veteran groups, academic affiliates, labor unions, VA employees, and local communities.

New health care facilities are in the works for Orlando, FL; Louisville and Lexington, KY; and Walla Walla, WA. In Orlando, where the VA currently operates only an outpatient clinic, the plans involve building a medical center that would encompass a 134-bed hospital, a 118-bed nursing home, a 60-bed domiciliary, a new outpatient clinic, and associated facilities. The VA has narrowed the original list of six possible locations to two sites, which will now undergo environmental assessments. In Louisville, the existing medical center will be replaced by a new facility at a site yet to be chosen. A priority for this project is improving women's health services. The VA is also considering relocating the Louisville Veterans Benefits Administration regional office to the site of the new medical center.

The projects in Lexington and Walla Walla involve new construction on existing sites. As part of the overall

modernization of Lexington's Leestown campus, the VA is studying two plans that both involve building new inpatient and outpatient facilities. In Walla Walla, the current acute medical and surgical facility will be replaced by an outpatient center that will offer primary, specialty, and mental health care services. At the suggestion of the local advisory panel, unused portions of the existing campus will be used to provide veterans with housing and other services.

The VA also has announced plans to modernize facilities in Montgomery, AL; White City, OR; and Livermore, CA. At the Montgomery campus, the VA has decided to maintain its inpatient mission and to reaffirm its partnership with Maxwell Air Force Base. The White City facility, which is the only free-standing rehabilitation center in the VA system, will undergo both renovation and new construction (including several new domiciliaries). The VA will undertake a detailed study of three options for modernizing or rebuilding the nursing home at the Livermore facility. Two of the options would keep the nursing home at its current location and one would build a new facility off-campus at the site of a community-based outpatient clinic.

In the major cities of Boston and New York, certain plans for consolidating facilities have been rejected. In New York, both the Brooklyn and Manhattan facilities will be retained, though some services may be consolidated. Factors in this decision included preserving important academic affiliations and maintaining the accessibility of care by both car and public transportation. Plans for New York also include major renovations at the St. Albans facility in Queens. In Boston, options for consolidating the Jamaica Plains and Roxbury facilities are still under consideration, but the plan to close all four existing facilities and build a single center has been abandoned.

## Junior Research Grant for Federal Clinicians

The American Society of Health System Pharmacists (ASHP) Research and Education Foundation is once again offering its Federal Services Junior Investigator Research Grant Program. Sponsored this year by Abbott Laboratories (Abbott Park, IL), the program seeks to encourage new federal researchers and help them sharpen their skills under the mentorship of more experienced colleagues. Four \$25,000 grants will be awarded to pharmacist, physician, or nurse investigators—who've had fewer than five years of professional experience or who've been the principal investigator on no more than two previous, externally funded research projects—working in the VA, DoD, or PHS.

According to 2004 grant winner Jeannie Kim Lee, PharmD, a pharmacist with Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC, the program provided her with a rare opportunity. She explained that, "as a health system pharmacist, unless you complete a fellowship or residency focused on research, the chance to act as a principal investigator for a study does not come often."

To be eligible for the 2006 award, applicants' projects should concentrate on medication adherence and persistence in older patients with HIV or AIDS, autoimmune diseases, psychiatric disorders, or stages 3 and 4 renal disease. The submission deadline is December 1, 2006. Further information on the grant program, eligibility criteria, and application details can be found on the ASHP foundation web site ([www.ashpfoundation.org/Research/index.cfm](http://www.ashpfoundation.org/Research/index.cfm)). In addition, Dr. Daniel Cobaugh, director of research for the foundation, will hold a conference call to review application questions on October 18. ●