



# Federal Health Matters

## DoD Reinstates Mandatory Anthrax Vaccinations

In a statement released on October 16, the DoD announced that it would resume its mandatory Anthrax Vaccine Immunization Program (AVIP). By January 2007, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness David S. C. Chu will release instructions to the military services on executing the AVIP. In addition to providing mandatory vaccinations for most U.S. forces stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and South Korea, and for military units appointed to homeland bioterrorism defense, the program will allow personnel who are no longer deployed to high risk areas but who began the vaccination process to receive follow-up doses and booster shots on a voluntary basis.

Critics of the program have long maintained that there is insufficient scientific evidence supporting the current vaccine's safety and efficacy. In October 2004, U.S. District Court Judge Emmet G. Sullivan halted the mandatory AVIP based on a petition filed by six U.S. service personnel questioning the legality of mandatory vaccination. As reported by the *Washington Post*, the judge ruled that the FDA should not have approved the current vaccine in 2003 without seeking public comment or conducting a full review. In response, the FDA held a 90-day comment period and granted final approval of the vaccine in December 2005.

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs William Winkenwerder, Jr., MD contends that the anthrax vaccine is necessary to protect troops against the potentially fatal infectious disease. During a voluntary vaccination period allowed by Judge Sullivan in 2005, the DoD reports that the rate of

participation was about 50%. "This rate of vaccination not only put the service members at risk," said Winkenwerder in a public statement, "but also jeopardized unit effectiveness and degraded medical readiness." Furthermore, he assured the *Washington Post* that, while some recipients of the anthrax vaccine may experience mild to severe adverse effects, this is common with any vaccination and is not indicative of an inherent danger in this particular vaccine.

Mark Zaid, attorney for the six plaintiffs, told the *Washington Post* that his clients plan to file a new lawsuit, claiming that the FDA's safe ruling was based solely on animal research and human studies conducted in the 1950s. In a May 9 report, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) stated that the vaccine has not been tested adequately on humans, no studies have been done to determine its long-term effects, and no inquiries have been made to establish definitively the appropriate dosing schedule. Consequently, the GAO report strongly encourages further investigation into an alternative to the current anthrax vaccine.

## Senate Confirms Howard as New VA Information Chief

After a hearing on September 26, the Senate confirmed Robert Howard as the VA's new assistant secretary for information and technology during an early morning session on September 30. Howard has been the acting assistant secretary since May.

The confirmation committee put a great emphasis on data security during Howard's confirmation, due in part to the controversy over the theft of two VA-owned laptops in May and

August of this year. Howard informed the committee that, among many other data security tasks undertaken since the thefts, nearly 15,000 VA laptops have been encrypted. He cautioned against relying solely on technologic solutions, however, stating that: "the best way to achieve 100% security is to make sure every single employee understands their responsibility. This is a people issue."

Prior to his tenure at the VA, Howard's career included 33 years in the U.S. Army, where he ascended to the rank of Major General, as well as nine years in the private sector with the Cubic Corporation, where he served as a vice president and general manager of the analysis and learning technologies division.

## Commission Begins Search for VA Under Secretary for Health

On October 6, VA Secretary R. James Nicholson named a 10-member commission to select candidates and recommend finalists for the post of VA under secretary for health, which was vacated on August 11 when Jonathan B. Perlin, MD left to join the private sector. The commission is chaired by Deputy Secretary Gordon H. Mansfield and includes Perlin.

Under federal law, the appointment of a VA under secretary is made without regard to political affiliation. Candidates should establish a history of sound fiscal management and of overseeing organizations similar in size and composition to the VHA. The committee is expected to complete its inquiry and submit its findings for Secretary Nicholson's review by January 2007. ●