



# Federal Health Matters

## Congress Resolves Differences on Veterans Benefits Bill

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On the last day of the 109th Congress, at approximately 3:00 AM, the Senate passed the omnibus Veterans Benefits, Health Care and Information Technology Improvement Act of 2006 (S. 3421). This legislation had been the source of some contention, as Senate and House members clashed over a facility construction project proposed for Charleston, SC. With the Senate's approval, however, the bill went on to President Bush, who signed it into law on December 22.

The controversial provision that threatened to hold up passage of the bill until the first session of the 110th Congress authorizes funding for advance planning of a collaboration project between the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center in Charleston and the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC). Both facilities are aging, and plans are underway to modernize the MUSC, which is located adjacent to the VA medical center. The House version of the bill (H.R. 5815), passed in September, included \$70 million to explore the benefits of building a new joint-use medical facility that would allow both entities to share state-of-the-art medical equipment, as well as clinicians. When the Senate balked at the proposal as written and the House refused to negotiate the terms, the legislation consequently stalled.

As the 109th Congress came to a close, however, the two houses compromised to move the bill forward. As enacted, S. 3421 includes authorization for the Charleston collaboration project—at approximately half the

originally proposed funding level. It also provides more than \$600 million to repair or replace VA Gulf Coast facilities damaged by hurricane waters, including the New Orleans medical center; authorizes \$98 million to replace the Denver VA Medical Center; greenlights 22 other major construction projects; and requires the VA to investigate options for building a new health care facility in San Juan, PR.

Other highlights of the bill include funds to boost the number of clinicians treating posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), improve PTSD training, and increase collaboration with the DoD on PTSD diagnosis and treatment; hire additional blind rehabilitation specialists and put them in more locations; expand telehealth initiatives for rural veterans and create a VA Office of Rural Health; give more community-based outpatient clinics the capability to treat mental illnesses; and designate six Parkinson's Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Centers of Excellence and at least two Multiple Sclerosis Centers of Excellence. Additionally, in response to the VA's recent efforts to centralize management of information security, the bill offers the VA an incentive to recruit personnel with specialized information skills and mandates that the VA provide breach notification to individuals, reports to Congress, fraud alerts, data breach analysis, credit monitoring services, and identity theft insurance.

## Grants Awarded for Native American Health Research

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On December 14, the IHS and the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS), one of the National Institutes of Health

(NIH), announced the recipients of approximately \$7.4 million in Native American biomedical and behavioral research grant funding. IHS Director Charles W. Grim, DDS, MHA said that the grants represent the fruits of "collaboration among agencies to improve the health status of and reduce health disparities among American Indians and Alaska Natives," adding that they "are culturally sensitive and strongly supported by tribal communities."

The funding, which is \$1.4 million higher than that awarded in 2005, comes from the Native American Research Centers for Health program, a partnership of several HHS agencies led by the IHS and NIGMS. Grants will be awarded to the following 12 programs: the Albuquerque Area Indian Health Board, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, the White Mountain Apache Tribe, the Northwest Portland Area Health Board, the Indian Health Council, the Inter-tribal Council of Arizona, the Black Hills Center for American Indian Health, the California Rural Indian Health Board, the Aberdeen Area Tribal Chairmen's Health Board, the Chickasaw Nation Health System, the Great Lakes Inter-tribal Council of Wisconsin, and the Southcentral Foundation. With the help of these funds, the programs will train researchers; work within the native communities in which they are based; and conduct studies in such health-related areas as substance abuse intervention, cancer screening, prenatal alcohol exposure and fetal alcohol syndrome, validation of depression and anxiety measures in Native Americans, and ethical and cultural implications of specimen banks. At press time, the funds were scheduled to be disbursed before the end of 2006.

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## USU Researchers Uncover Common Lineage for *Chlamydia* and Plants

Researchers from the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences (USU), Bethesda, MD, in collaboration with a team from Rutgers University School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, New Brunswick, NJ, have demonstrated an evolutionary link between the *Chlamydia* bacterium and the mustard plant *Arabidopsis thaliana*. They believe this discovery could lead to the development of an antibiotic specifically targeted against *Chlamydia* infection, the most common sexually transmitted bacterial infection in the United States.

The USU team, led by Anthony T. Maurelli, PhD, professor of microbiology and immunology, studied the genome sequence of *Chlamydia trachomatis* and found it is missing certain genes believed necessary to produce the amino acid diaminopimelate (DAP). Both plants and bacteria use DAP to make lysine, an essential amino acid, and bacteria also use DAP as a key building block in cell wall production. Maurelli's team discovered that a single gene, which encodes the enzyme

L,L-diaminopimelate aminotransferase, provides the pathway for *C. trachomatis* to synthesize DAP.

These findings proved similar to those of the Rutgers team studying *A. thaliana* DAP synthesis. According to lead researcher Thomas Leustek, PhD, professor of plant biology and pathology at Rutgers, "further experimentation confirmed that the chlamydial gene had the same function as the *Arabidopsis* gene, demonstrating their common ancestry." Together, the researchers published their results in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* in November.

While existing antibiotics can treat *Chlamydia* infection effectively, the problem of emerging bacterial resistance keeps new antibiotic discovery a priority. If the researchers can find a chemical that specifically blocks L,L-diaminopimelate aminotransferase, the result could be a highly specific anti-*Chlamydia* drug.

## Top VA Audiologist Honored

Lucille B. Beck, national director of the VA Audiology and Speech Pathology Service and chief consultant for VA

Rehabilitation Services, received the Honors of the Association Award from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) during the organization's national conference in Miami in late November. The award, ASHA's highest honor, distinguishes those who make innovative and important contributions to the field of speech, language, and hearing.

Beck's VA career has spanned almost three decades, during which she has been credited with increasing the professional recognition of audiologists and speech pathologists in the VA, grounding patient care in evidence-based research methods, and developing and managing the federal hearing health care program. In 2000, she became the first audiologist to receive the Presidential Rank Award, from former President William J. Clinton. Recently, she has been at the helm of efforts to boost understanding of the effects of polytrauma blast injuries on speech, language, and hearing in veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. ●

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