



Federal Health Matters

New Members Join VA Committee for Minority Vets

VA Secretary James B. Peake, MD announced on February 12 the appointment of six new members to the Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans. Chartered on January 30, 1995, the expert panel is composed of veterans who represent various minority groups and have gained insight—through their experiences within and outside the military—into those issues affecting minority veterans.

Black, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Island Americans comprise as much as 21% of the total veteran population. These veterans face some unique challenges in terms of both health care access and disease management. For instance, the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study found that most minority groups of Vietnam veterans had higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder than their white counterparts, due in part to greater exposure to war and race-related stressors.

As part of the VA's Center for Minority Veterans, the Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans is responsible for advising the secretary and Congress on the VA's administration of benefits and health care services to minority veterans; providing an annual report of recommendations and concerns to Congress; meeting with VA officials, veteran organizations, and other stakeholders; making periodic VA site facility visits; and holding town hall meetings with veterans. In the 2007 annual report, for example, the committee made several recommendations to help the VA improve access to care for veterans in Alaska based on an October 2006 site visit to the VA

facility in Anchorage, which included a town hall meeting.

The new committee members are: Doris Browne, MD, MPH of Washington, DC; Irene Zoppi, PhD of Crofton, MD; Furnie Lambert, Jr. of Maxton, NC; John W. Jelks of Dale City, VA; Shoshana N. Johnson of El Paso, TX; and Alexander Y. Chan of Fairfax Station, VA. As a group, they bring to the committee a wide range of experiences, including service in all branches of the U.S. armed forces, leadership in various federal agencies, and academic positions. "These new members are veterans who represent the diversity of America and are recognized authorities in areas pertinent to the needs of our veterans," said Peake.

MHS Holds First Virtual Town Hall

On February 14, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs S. Ward Casscells III, MD hosted a "web hall" session, an online town hall-style forum that allowed service members and their families to submit questions and comments to a panel of DoD representatives and experts from the Military Health System (MHS). The hour-long session, the first of its kind for the MHS, focused on administration of health care for wounded warriors and covered topics as varied as pain management, the medical evaluation process, and research initiatives.

Starting two days before the event, participants could submit questions through the web hall web site (<http://www.health.mil/WoundedWarriorWebhall.aspx>). During the live session, questions were answered by Casscells; Steve Jones, PhD, principle deputy assistant secre-

tary of defense for health affairs; Ellen Embrey, deputy assistant secretary of defense for force health protection and readiness; and Jack Smith, MD, acting assistant secretary of defense and chief medical officer. Participants whose questions were not addressed during the live session were assured they would receive answers within 24 hours, and the web site was enabled to accept additional questions after the live session had ended.

In their questions, many participants expressed frustration with the treatment choices available within the MHS and with the transition between the DoD and VA health care systems. When asked how the DoD has been spending additional funding authorized by Congress to address health care and transitional issues, Casscells responded that much of the money has been allocated to support the hiring of psychologists, psychiatrists, and nurse clinicians in the army, navy, and air force; improve predeployment screening; implement educational programs that reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health care; and investigate new screening measures for mild traumatic brain injury. Additionally, Casscells said the MHS is taking steps to reduce the rising rate of suicide in the army and working with the National Institutes of Health on stem cell research. He also mentioned DoD-VA collaborations to improve the disability evaluation process and upgrade electronic health records to "make them more useful, private, portable, and patient-controlled."

Casscells called the first web hall session a "great start for opening a dialogue" with MHS beneficiaries and described his plans to host regular web hall sessions with senior MHS staff in the future. ●