



News from the federal health sector

★ New Hotline for Women Veterans

According to a VA press release on April 23, 2013, women make up nearly 15% of active-duty military and 18% of National Guard and Reserve forces but only 6% of VA patients. However, since 2000, the number of women using VA health care more than doubled, to more than 354,000 in 2012. As more women serve in all branches of the military, officials expect the number of women using VA services will also climb.

Many women who have served don't "self-identify" as veterans, says Irene Trowell-Harris, director of VA's Center for Women Veterans, so they don't think they qualify for VA benefits, even though they are entitled to the same benefits as their male counterparts, including health care, pharmacy, education, disability compensation, home loans, and employment assistance.

Correcting such misinformation and misperceptions is important, "so we can serve more women veterans with the benefits they've earned," Trowell-Harris says. To that end, in 2010, the VA established an outbound call center to contact women veterans and encourage them to enroll in VA health care. And now VA has launched a new hotline—(855) VA-WOMEN—to receive and respond to questions from veterans, their families, and caregivers about the many VA services and resources available to women veterans. The service began accepting calls on April 23, 2013.

Knowledgeable VA hotline staffers can link callers to information on claims, education, or health care appointments, as well as information about VA cemeteries and memorial benefits. Staff can also answer urgent questions and provide referrals to homeless and mental health services.

For those women who don't yet know about the services available to them, "the hotline will allow us to field their questions and provide critical information about the latest enhancements in VA services," says VA Secretary Eric Shinseki.

★ Task Force Report Out on Gulf War Illnesses

The Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses (GWVI) Task Force has published its 2012 draft report in the Federal Register for public feedback and comment.

The report focuses on efforts to improve health care for Gulf War veterans, including "innovative enhancements to clinical care," according to a May 13, 2013, VA press release. The report identified 7 areas where VA will make improvements:

- clinical care—leveraging veteran-centric specialty services in primary care;
- clinical education and training—putting clinical knowledge into practice;
- veteran benefits—delivering compensation and pension and fiduciary services;
- veteran outreach—improving communications to Gulf War veterans;
- partnerships—improving data sharing with the DoD;
- ongoing scientific review and surveillance—taking advantage of untapped sources of data related to veterans' health; and
- research and development—encouraging targeted efforts.

The task force also plans to improve linkages between specialty knowledge and services at the basic point of care and to address treatment for chronic multisymptom illness, an ongoing concern for Gulf War veterans, their families, and their health care providers.

Those improvements will be supported by clinical research and development, as outlined in the recent *Research Strategic Plan on Gulf War Illnesses*, which will be used to help refine clinical practice and clinical education throughout the VA. The plan addresses such concerns as the urgent need to establish an evidence-based case definition of chronic multisymptom illness. Another area of research is genetics/genomics/systems biology—in other words, understanding the biological networks involved in GWVIs. Studies have suggested, for instance, that some people may have a genetic advantage of resistance when exposed to various toxins. Among other proposed research, the strategic plan notes that one goal is to identify biomarkers in ill Gulf War veterans that may facilitate the diagnoses of GWVIs and allow monitoring of disease progress and response to treatment.

The VA and DoD also recently approved a research project to develop a long-term exposure record to collect and share deployment and exposure data, a model informed by lessons learned in earlier Gulf War studies. According to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, "This decades-long research and continuing partnership has not only transformed the care and services to Gulf War veterans, but has also made us smarter about how we care for veterans of all eras."

"We know Gulf War veterans are experiencing critical long-term medical issues that are complex and difficult to label," Shinseki said. "VA has learned a great deal over the past 20 years about identifying, diagnosing, and treating Gulf War veterans, and we will continue to evaluate our research and clinical findings to ensure we keep providing world-class health care and benefits for Gulf War veterans." ●