

# The Gap in VA Dental Care is Nothing to Smile About

*For there was never yet philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently.*

**Much Ado About Nothing** by William Shakespeare



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**A**lmost anyone who has worked for a long time in a US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) clinic or hospital has had patients in dire need of dental services who could neither access nor pay for them. I have seen dental problems ranging from older veterans who were nearly edentulous and needed expensive dentures or implants to younger veterans who never had regular dental care and needed a periodontist to save their teeth, to individuals with terrible toothaches that antibiotics could not cure. As Shakespeare quips in *Much Ado About Nothing*, almost nothing is worse than a toothache.

Many VA primary care practitioners and social workers kept lists of local sliding-scale dentists or arranged for veterans to visit dental and hygiene school clinics for reduced fees. Even when VA dentists were not permitted to see a veteran, many would assist in finding them affordable care in the community. However, that was never enough to meet the oral health needs of veterans. One of the most common complaints of patients who otherwise were pleased with their VA health care was that it did not cover dental services.<sup>1</sup>

Most veterans qualify for health care and other VA benefits. Dental care is an exception, with only about a quarter (26%) of the > 9 million veterans active in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) eligible for care. Even under this restricted eligibility, about 888,000 veterans have received dental services either through the VHA or in the community. In 2025, the VA paid community-based dentists for > 3.5 million procedures for veterans, which underscores the magnitude of the demand.<sup>2</sup>

Given the gap in dental care, many veterans and their caregivers both personal and professional will likely be encouraged that in February the VA announced plans to improve access to dental care through expanding community care dental services. “Dental health is a critical component of overall well-being,” VA Secretary

Doug Collins noted. VA issued a request for proposals (RFP) for a new dental administrator who would oversee the operations of a new network of dental practitioners. The new vendor contract would operationalize general dental services, like tooth extractions, as well as specialized services such as periodontics, dentures, and pharmacy support for dental medications. Most importantly, the new program would cover preventive care to help avoid many of the dental problems veterans now experience. Proposals are due March 16.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, there is a catch. The community care program will only be available to eligible veterans just like previous dental services both in the VA and the community. I was always somewhat ashamed that despite my working decades at the VHA, I never had a satisfactory answer for veterans who asked me why they were not eligible for dental care. The regulatory response is that eligibility for dental services is a complex determination depending on service-connected military service, and specialized clinical indices. Dental coverage is provided for veterans who have 100% service-connected or total disability, prisoners of war, and veterans whose dental disease exacerbates a comorbid medical condition. Those not eligible for VA dental coverage may still get treatment if they, for example, have a cancer diagnosis and without dental work the chemotherapy treatment would place them at a higher risk of an oral infection. Veterans participating in a rehabilitation program who have poor dentition that prevents them from reaching their rehabilitative goals also may receive VA dental care. In addition, some veterans who are experiencing homelessness and others who did not receive a dental examination prior to discharge from active duty may be eligible for dental benefits.<sup>3</sup> VA also offers lower-priced dental insurance for ineligible veterans.<sup>4</sup>

The new RFP does little to expand eligibility of veterans to receive VA dental care, and it is hard to not see the announcement as another

step in the privatization of VHA. Medically and ethically, it seems to perpetuate a double standard between physical and oral health that makes no scientific sense.<sup>5-7</sup> I sometimes joke that in medical school we had maybe 2 days of teaching about teeth and even that limited exposure to dental pathology was sufficient for us to learn that chronic conditions like respiratory disease and lifestyle choices like poor diet cause and contribute to dental problems.

Like so many areas of veteran care, dental health in veterans is worse compared with those who never served, making it harder to justify the exclusion of dental services from veteran health benefits. A study in *Military Medicine* looked at 11,539 former service members and found a higher prevalence of individuals with tooth decay, missing teeth, tooth fillings, caries, and periodontitis. While military service per se was not associated with the findings, higher rates of hypertension, hyperlipidemia, depression, and diabetes in veterans compared with nonveterans, which are related to serving in uniform, were covariates.<sup>8</sup>

That depression is an indirect factor in dental disease may seem surprising. However, this is more evidence that human health is truly holistic, with mutual interactions between the body (including the teeth) and mind. Oral care needs to be incorporated into the VA whole health approach for all veterans. In a series of articles in *Psychiatric News*, VA psychiatrist Antoinette Shappell and VA dentist Pierre Cartier identify several links between dental and mental health.<sup>9,10</sup> Veterans with anxiety disorders may fear going to the dentist even when care is needed. Serious mental illness may result in poor diet, and difficulty performing preventive care. Many psychotropic medications may cause xerostomia that worsens tooth decay and veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder may suffer from bruxism. I regularly saw these conditions when I worked in a primary care psychiatry clinic. Being able to coordinate with VA dentists and staff to provide integrated care would have benefited these already burdened veterans.

An estimated \$5.4 billion has been spent on 3.6 million veterans who were seen in

emergency departments for dental problems. That cost alone should convince policy makers that the deficit in VA dental care needs to be filled with efficacious high-quality comprehensive dental services for as many veterans as possible. And there are signs that is exactly what is happening in Congress. A bill in the House of Representatives proposes to expand dental care benefits to all veterans eligible for other VA health benefits.<sup>11</sup> There are also other legislative initiatives in the works.<sup>4</sup> Together with the VA's plans for a new community care dental network, that does give veterans and federal practitioners something to smile about.

### Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of *Federal Practitioner*, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

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