

Why Do We Need the VA?

We will remember you. We will remember you. We will remember you with love and gratitude.

Christopher “Geppert” Cross, We Will Remember You



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The weather grows colder, the leaves are changing colors then falling, and it is time to gather close all we hold dear and to remember those who have gone before and those who have given for us—it is November. Across the world nations set aside a day to honor fallen heroes and wounded warriors. In Canada and Australia, it is Remembrance Day, in the US, it is Veterans Day, November 11.

War is older than recorded history, and every culture has experiences of violent conflict. Thus, every society has those men and women who have been harmed in body and mind and soul in mortal combat and yet survived and those who have perished on the battlefield or in its aftermath or wished they had.

The bloody, brutal human toll of organized strife has led many a society to recognize a moral obligation to develop a dedicated means of delivering medical care and social support to not just those who are serving actively but to those whose days in action are past. The utilitarian rationale for military medicine is clearly stated in the United States Army Medical Command mission, “Army Medicine provides sustained health services and research in support of the Total Force to enable readiness and conserve the fighting strength while caring for our Soldiers for Life and Families.”¹ It is a measure of the self-sacrifice of those who have sworn to defend their homeland and their healing brothers and sisters in arms that they deliberately make this commitment to each other and their fellow citizens. Yet we cannot easily extend this logic to the care of veterans. Why have diverse countries across millennia seen fit to carve out a special space for veteran health care? In this column, we will seek an answer in culture and history.

The Roman Empire, which relied heavily on its soldiers for the peace and prosperity of the empire was among the first political entities to recognize the need for military health care and to dedicate human and financial capital to subsidize care for veterans. Among the first hospitals

in the world were built to care for Roman legions and the ancient medics like their modern counterparts advanced medical and especially surgical progress that benefited the public.²

Today it is not only the US that has special systems of health care for veterans. The Australia Department of Veterans’ Affairs provides many of the same health and social service benefits as those of the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Likewise, Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) offers those who served and are eligible a variety of resources, including health care. Why does VAC provide health care for veterans?

Veterans Affairs Canada deeply values the contribution that Veterans have made to the development of our nation and we honour the sacrifices they have made.... In expressing Canada’s gratitude to them, we strive to exemplify many of the same principles which they represent—integrity, respect, service and commitment, accountability, and teamwork.³

Many of these same motifs are repeated in the legislation that officially changed the November 11th commemoration from Armistice Day to Veterans Day. The holiday originated to mark the ending of the terrible First World War in which so many young men’s futures ended in the stench and mud of European trenches. Where Armistice Day celebrated the peace of the Treaty of Versailles and Memorial Day commemorates those in uniform who made the ultimate sacrifice; Veterans Day honors all veterans those still with us and those who have gone before. At the urging of veterans service organizations, as President, the great Army general Dwight D. Eisenhower declared in 1954 November 11 to be Veterans Day with these words:

On that day let us solemnly remember the sacrifices of all those who fought so valiantly, on the seas, in the air, and on foreign shores, to preserve our heritage of freedom, and let us re-consecrate ourselves to the task of promoting an enduring peace so that their efforts shall not have been in vain.⁴

From these and other political proclamations, we can discern 4 ethical purposes that have

motivated so many eras and states to maintain institutions to protect the health and promote the well-being of veterans. The first is gratitude, for those who lost something precious—be it health, function, soundness of mind, wholeness of limb, even life itself. The soldiers, airmen, sailors, marines, and others deserve not only our thanks, but also giving of our substance through taxes and the discharge of our democratic duties to support them through health care and housing, benefits, and burial.

The second purpose is that we owe all veterans a debt, a debt we can never fully repay, because no price can be placed on mental health, on freedom from pain and suffering, from being without a husband or a mother, and yet that is the price that many veterans paid. The least we can do is ensure that they have a health care system that understands the nature of their narratives and invests in the development of expertise particularity in psychophysical sequelae of war like traumatic brain injuries, amputations, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance use.

The third purpose is that those who carried weapons, who were shot at, and who suffered so many other assaults outside the range of expected human experience fought to secure for all generations the 2 most precious qualities of civilization: freedom and peace. Once their work was done and the uniform hung in the closet and the medals put in a drawer, service men and women passed on to all of us—especially those who are committed to provide their medical care—that cause.

The fourth purpose is the simplest yet perhaps the most morally compelling—to remember the history of sacrifice. In my VA and in many others, unlike any private hospital on the planet, the walls are filled with military memorabilia. There is a memorial statute of a Medal of Honor winner for whom the facility is named in front of the main hospital with a giant American flag waving proudly. All these symbols tell the veteran walking through the halls that this he or she is the primary ethical justification for this health care organization.

These are the most powerful arguments to refute the many recent articles that question the very existence of the VA. Many of those authors, including one of my mentors, have

ethical grounds for their calls for an end to a separate health care system for veterans.⁵ Believe me, after nearly 2 decades in the VA, I know firsthand we have much to improve in efficiency, responsiveness, and accountability. But is it really an ethical or even a scientific truth that veteran health care can be delivered more successfully by the private sector? That depends on the terms in which success is defined. Many of those who so blithely and at times irresponsibly proclaim that “we do not need a VA” display in the words of my own admired commander, “the reckless courage of noncombatants.” Solid health care research from independent sources suggests that the VA offers most community health care organizations a run for their money in terms of economies of scale and quality of outcomes in many areas.⁶ Yet this column contends that the measure of success for veteran health care is that the majority of VA and US Department of Defense health care professionals and administrators remain dedicated to these 4 core purposes. Success for these institutions is to seek and to strive through research, teaching, and clinical care to discover and deliver those therapies and medicaments with the most potential to preserve and enhance freedom of body and peace of mind that veterans deserve every day, not only on November 11.

Disclaimer

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