



Federal Health Matters

House Examines VA's Progress in Medical Emergency Preparedness

What roles should the VA play in preventing and responding to medical disasters that result from terrorist attacks or naturally occurring events? And how far has the VA come since September 11, 2001 in improving its ability to fulfill these roles? These questions were the subject of a hearing before the House VA Committee on August 26.

Testifying at the hearing were VA, DoD, and HHS officials, as well as outside experts on medical preparedness and bioterrorism. There was general agreement that, as the largest health care system in the United States, the VA represents an essential resource in the nation's efforts to boost preparedness in the post-9/11 world and has valuable contributions to make in the clinical, educational, administrative, and research arenas.

In his testimony, VA Deputy Secretary Gordon H. Mansfield outlined steps the VA has taken over the past three years to improve its preparedness. He cited a number of changes aimed at providing "a comprehensive, 'all-hazards' approach to emergency management for the entire department," including the creation of the new Office of Operations and Readiness; dedication of additional

resources for emergency preparedness training, education, exercises, and research; and large increases in funding for preparedness-related activities. He pointed out that, between 2002 and 2004, VA funding for all homeland security initiatives increased by \$186.8 million—most of which was allocated to medical emergency preparedness.

Among the specific accomplishments Mansfield described were the implementation of a national preexposure plan for smallpox, in which close to 1,500 VA employees were vaccinated and 9,000 vaccine doses were stockpiled for emergency use; the addition of 143 internal pharmaceutical caches at VA medical centers in order to ensure adequate supplies in the immediate aftermath of a disaster; and the development of educational materials for staff and patients, including brochures, videos, satellite broadcasts, training modules, and pocket guides.

One of the most important training tools the VA has produced since September 11, Mansfield said, is the *Emergency Management Program Guidebook*. Designed to help VA facilities comply with the rigorous emergency management standards established by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), this guidebook also serves as a supplement to VA policy documents on emergency management and security. In addition to distributing the guidebook to all

VA facilities in March 2002, the VA also furnished about 1,000 copies to private hospitals, upon their request, to help them meet JCAHO's standards.

Mansfield also highlighted the important functions the VA performs with regard to national preparedness. As one of the support agencies for the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS), which is coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in support of state and local governments during federally declared emergencies, the VA provides a nationwide network of Area Emergency Managers that assist in local planning. The VA also serves as a primary backup to the military health system in the event of war or a national emergency involving armed forces in combat and participates as a support agency in the Interim National Response Plan.

Both of the outside experts testifying at the hearing said the VA's role in national medical preparedness should be expanded. Jerry L. Mothershead, MD, physician advisor for the Medical Readiness and Response Group of Battelle Memorial Institute (Columbus, OH) and former senior medical consultant to the Navy Medicine Office of Homeland Security, recommended that the VA encourage its facilities to collaborate more closely with community trauma and emergency response systems; increase its participation in the NDMS; and spearhead the development of a

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competency-based, tiered, national standard for educating providers on clinical and operational aspects of treating victims of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. To this, Neil C. Livingstone, PhD, chief executive officer of GlobalOptions, Inc. (Washington, DC) and author of nine books on terrorism, added a call for increased VA funding to: (1) support the realization of four VA research centers proposed in 2002 to enhance knowledge about responding to chemical, biological, and radiological attacks and (2) allow the VA to participate in front-line medical response, rather than providing only secondary support when local resources are exhausted, without compromising its primary mission of caring for veterans.

Grants Available for Junior Investigators in Federal Research

The American Society of Health System Pharmacists' Research and Education Foundation is offering research grants for junior investigators in the DoD, VA, and PHS. Funded by a grant from Novartis Pharmaceuticals, Inc. (Basel, Switzerland), this program aims to help improve federal health care, develop and strengthen the skills of new federal researchers, and foster mentoring of junior researchers by more experienced colleagues.

Projects should focus on chronic medication therapy management issues with a view toward improving outcomes in elders, emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration, and enroll only patients over 50 years of age who receive care in a federal health care facility. Priority will be given to projects that will

provide data for evidence-based medicine, present unique approaches or process improvements to the medication use system, or introduce new investigator mentorship models.

To be eligible for grant funding, the principal investigator must be a licensed pharmacist, licensed prescribing physician, or licensed prescribing nurse practitioner who has completed his or her terminal degree or postgraduate training within the past five years or has been the principal investigator on no more than two previous funded research projects. The research team also must include a senior investigator or advisor acting as mentor.

More information on the grant program and applications can be found on the foundation's web site (www.ashpfoundation.org). The submission deadline is December 15, 2004, and recipients will be announced on March 1, 2005.

Improving VA Recruitment and Retention

As VA health care facilities face an impending nursing shortage, and an increasing number of VA employees reach retirement age, both Congress and the VA are taking steps to improve the VA's ability to recruit and retain qualified professionals.

On September 30, the full House passed the VA Nurse Recruitment and Retention Act of 2004. Rep. Robert Simmons (R-CT), prime sponsor of the bill, said the legislation would "give [the] VA the needed tools and strategies to address the recruitment and retention of nurses." Specifically, it authorizes three alternative work

schedules for nurses: three 12-hour shifts per week, paid as a regular 40-hour workweek; seven 10-hour shifts per two-week pay period, paid as a regular 80-hour pay period; and nine months of full-time work with three months off, paid at 75% of the full-time rate over a 12-month period. These options are designed to offer flexibility for nurses seeking to balance both work and family needs. The bill also would initiate a pilot program to investigate the effectiveness of using private recruitment, advertising, and communications agencies, as well as web-based technologies, to improve the VA's nurse recruiting efforts.

A week before the bill passed, the VA issued a policy stating that the lack of a baccalaureate nursing degree will not be considered an obstacle to hiring VA nurses, thus preventing discrimination against licensed registered nurses with associate degrees. More recently, it announced the creation of an electronic recruiting tool: a CD-ROM promoting the VA as "an employer of choice." The disc—which has been distributed to universities, veterans organizations, military transition centers, and VA vocational rehabilitation centers—uses graphics and video to describe the VA's mission and goals and discuss the numerous opportunities and benefits the department has to offer. It also presents employee testimonials and links users to online job searching tools. According to Tim S. McClain, acting assistant secretary for human resources management and administration, the CD-ROM represents a "corporate recruitment marketing approach" that gives the VA "a competitive edge in attracting highly qualified career applicants." ●