



Federal Health Matters

“Golden Aged” Vets Get Physical

From May 21 through 26, the Oklahoma City VA Medical Center will host the 19th Veterans Golden Age Games at the University of Oklahoma, Norman. Cosponsored by the VA, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Ladies Auxiliary, and the Veterans Canteen Service, the games promote the preventive and therapeutic value of sports, fitness, and recreation. This year, more than 500 veterans aged 55 and older who currently receive VHA care are expected to compete in 14 sports, including swimming, bicycling, bowling, discus, shot put, and golf. Roy Gantt, a 70-year-old veteran who has competed in the games for several years, explains that the event “gets you in great physical shape and helps you feel better about yourself,” while providing a “chance to catch up with old friends and make some new ones.”

Earlier this month, veterans with spinal cord injuries, orthopedic amputations, visual impairments, and other disabilities took part in the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass Village, CO. Also in its 19th year, the six-day clinic is sponsored annually by the VA and Disabled American Veterans and hosted by the VA's Rocky Mountain Network and the medical center at Grand Junction, CO. While the focus is on adaptive Alpine and Nordic skiing, this year's

clinic included instruction in scuba diving, sled hockey, snowmobiling, rock climbing, and even self-defense (taught by secret service members). Former VA Secretary Anthony J. Principi praises the veterans' “strength of spirit and determination,” saying they “encourage all...who face challenges.”

DoD Tracks Combat Trauma

For the first time in history, the DoD is capturing medical data from the combat theater in real time and entering it into a new trauma registry, maintained at Fort Sam Houston, TX. The purpose behind the Joint Theater Trauma Registry is multifaceted: Information on trauma wounds, medical care, and outcomes from Iraq and Afghanistan not only will help determine the most effective methods for treating military trauma but also will shape future decisions about troop protective gear, medical personnel training, design of combat support hospitals, and battlefield evacuation. Although L. Harrison Hassell, a retired army colonel and director of the registry system, calls the process of collecting, coding, and analyzing data “painfully slow,” he says it's already paying off in such areas as medical improvements, logistics and operational planning, and research and development.

Grief Counseling for Military Families

The VA's Office of Readjustment Counseling is now offering grief counseling at the 206 community-based Vet Centers located throughout the 50 states, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands to families of service members (including reservists and National Guard members) who have died while on active duty. Charles Flora, associate program director, describes this expansion of services to veterans' families as a “leap and a real innovation” for the VA.

So far, over 400 spouses, children, siblings, parents, and grandparents have taken advantage of these services, which range from one-time visits to weekly sessions. They have been referred by such organizations as the nonprofit, peer support group Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors; military casualty assistance offices; the VA; and veterans service groups.

Bereaved family members don't need a medical diagnosis to seek help and can do so at any time after the loss of their loved one. Counselors guarantee the confidentiality of all information disclosed in sessions. And because most Vet Center employees are veterans themselves, they bring a special understanding of military life and experiences to their work. ●