



Federal Health Matters

DoD Offers Health Care Incentive to Separating Reservists

As of last month, a new premium-based health care plan is available for certain National Guard and Reserve members who make a commitment to stay in their reserve component (RC) after separating from active duty. Under the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2005, TRICARE Reserve Select (TRS) provides enrollees and their qualified family members with comprehensive health care coverage similar to that provided through TRICARE's Standard and Extra plans.

Eligibility is determined by the member's personnel office and requires at least 90 consecutive days of active duty service in support of a contingency operation since September 11, 2001. For every 90-day qualifying active duty period served, eligible members can receive up to one year of TRS coverage, provided they execute and fulfill a service agreement with their RC for the duration of that coverage period. For example, an eligible reservist who completed 360 days of active duty service and agrees to a new four-year reserve contract can receive up to four years of TRS coverage.

Eligible members who have already separated from active duty and wish to participate in TRS must enter into a new service

agreement by October 28, 2005. Those currently on active duty must commit to the agreement prior to separating. Coverage begins once the service agreement is executed and ends when the service agreement ends—or if the member leaves the RC or can no longer pay the monthly premiums (\$75 for single coverage or \$233 for family coverage).

Principi Nominated to Head BRAC Commission

President Bush has nominated former VA Secretary Anthony Principi to lead the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission, the nine-member panel in charge of evaluating the Pentagon's plans for closing military bases and realigning operations. During its first four months, the commission will hold public hearings and visit the bases potentially affected. Its recommendations, due in September, must be approved by the President and Congress prior to implementation.

Principi, a decorated Vietnam veteran, stepped down from his VA post this past December. He is currently the vice president of government relations for Pfizer Inc. (New York, NY). His successor at the VA, R. James Nicholson, was confirmed unanimously by the Senate and sworn in on February 1.

VA Renews Outreach Efforts for "Mustard Gas Veterans"

On March 17, the VA announced a national outreach campaign to locate veterans who were exposed to mustard agents (such as sulfur mustard and nitrogen mustard) or lewisite (a chemical that contains organic arsenic and causes blisters) during their military service. Building on an earlier awareness campaign initiated in 1993, this latest effort was prompted by the DoD's identification of additional "mustard gas veterans." These veterans—or their survivors—will receive a direct mailing from the VA that explains medical and financial benefits, outlines data on the effects of exposure to chemical warfare agents, and includes telephone numbers for VA and DoD offices involved in the campaign.

Most of the veterans were exposed to these agents through their participation in DoD chemical testing programs during World War II. The tests were designed to evaluate the effectiveness of protective clothing, ointments, and equipment used by American troops. According to the DoD, approximately 4,500 service members experienced some level of exposure—from a drop on the arm to full-body exposure. The VA has mailed information to the first group of veterans identified and continues to seek the addresses of others on the list. ●