



Federal Health Matters

VA and TRICARE Combat Obesity

Because an increasing number of veterans and active duty service members are overweight, officials in the federal health care system are taking steps to educate members on healthy lifestyle habits. For example, on February 27, the VA announced that it's teaming up with the HHS on "HealthierUS Veterans," an educational effort promoting healthy eating and physical activity among veterans and their families.

Within the VA health care system, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is 70%, compared to the national prevalence of 64%. Veterans are similarly more likely than the general population to be affected by diabetes (20% versus 7%). "Obesity and diabetes are major threats to the health and lifestyles of our veterans, [who deserve] a robust campaign to better educate them on healthy habits," said VA Secretary R. James Nicholson.

As part of the campaign, VA medical centers will collaborate with local groups in 40 communities that receive HHS-backed grants to promote nutrition and exercise through "Steps to a HealthierUS." In this program, overweight veterans can participate in individualized weight loss plans and receive pedometers, diet advisors, and "prescriptions" for exercise routines.

According to HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt, by encouraging veterans to "adopt a healthy lifestyle and to take responsibility for making wise choices to improve their fitness and health," the "HealthierUS Veterans" campaign is central to the overall HHS goal of controlling health care costs and preventing chronic disease.

Similarly, obesity is a growing concern among active duty service members. From 1995 to 2002, the percentage of overweight service members has increased by 10%. TRICARE Management Activity has created a demonstration project that will test several methods of obesity education and prevention on its non-active duty beneficiaries.

The Research Triangle Institute, Research Triangle Park, NC and the Cooper Institute, Dallas, TX will implement the Healthy Eating and Active Living in TRICARE Households program, or HEALTH, in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan. The project will be open to TRICARE Prime-enrolled, overweight, non-active duty beneficiaries 18 to 64 years of age who live within 50 miles of the designated research centers.

Using telephone, internet, and interactive behavioral support, the project will determine whether a 5% to 10% weight loss can be achieved by participants and maintained over the course of the study. It also will determine the effectiveness of behavioral intervention at different intensities with or without medication. The demonstration project will be conducted as an institutional review board-approved research study, with the goal of assisting TRICARE in determining ways to deliver the most benefit to its members.

VA Promotes Collaboration Opportunities

The House Committee on Veterans Affairs held an oversight hearing on March 9 on possible opportunities for collaboration between the VA, DoD, and state-affiliated medical institutions in order to enhance efficiency, improve

access, and increase health care quality for veterans. Committee Chairman Steve Buyer (R-IN), who led the hearing, explained that working with the military "helps perfect the seamless transition" of service members into the VA, and that "enhanced collaboration with medical universities is the next logical step." According to William Winkenwerder, MD, MBA, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, the VA and DoD already have 446 sharing agreements, covering over 2,000 health services.

One such partnership has been formed between the Charleston VA Medical Center, Charleston, SC and the Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston. For over a year, Chairman Buyer has worked with Henry Brown (R-SC), chairman of the subcommittee on health, to promote shared medical staff and research efforts between the two facilities. In August 2005, to combat their similar problems of aging infrastructure, the facilities created an ad hoc group to develop options to share facilities and integrate the delivery of veterans' health care services. Their collaboration serves as a basic framework for exploring other mutually beneficial agreements, such as one between the VA and Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge to replace the New Orleans VA Medical Center, New Orleans, LA, which was severely damaged in Hurricane Katrina.

"Collaboration is becoming increasingly essential in delivering health care," said Subcommittee Chairman Brown. "So long as we remain true to the distinct identity of the VA, and so long as we ensure the continued quality associated with VA care, we should embrace opportunities to maximize local health-related economies." ●