



Federal Health Matters

VA Secretary Resigns Amid New Highs and Lows

On July 17, VA Secretary R. James Nicholson announced his resignation, which will be effective no later than October 1. Nicholson has stated that he is leaving the VA to return to the private sector, though he has not described specific plans for the future. In a video conference, he told VA staff members across the country that he has been privileged to work with them and that they “deserve the credit” for strides the VA had made “in meeting the growing needs and expectations of our veterans.”

During Nicholson’s tenure, which began in February 2005, the VA has been criticized harshly for shortcomings even as it has enjoyed praise for its achievements. Among the crises the VA has faced over the past few years were a budget shortfall of nearly \$1 billion in 2005 and several data security breaches that compromised the sensitive data of millions of veterans. And while the Walter Reed Army Medical Center scandal earlier this year largely concerned DoD care, it has had repercussions for the VA as well. Moreover, the influx of new Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans has coincided with a variety of problems (such as large backlogs in claims processing and long wait times for VA appointments) that have drawn the scrutiny of Congress and the White House. As a result, a number of special task forces, independent review panels, and federal oversight agencies (such as the Government Accountability Office) have made recommendations to improve both the benefits offered by the VA and the processes by which these benefits are provided.

Reactions to Nicholson’s resignation have been mixed. Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of the veterans advocacy group Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, called it “welcome news” and expressed his hope that President Bush will approach OEF and OIF veterans “for feedback and possible replacements.” In a July 18 *Washington Post* article, Larry E. Craig (R-ID), ranking Republican member of the Senate VA Committee, praised Nicholson for having “fought hard to improve care” for veterans with traumatic brain injuries and posttraumatic stress disorder. House VA Committee Chair Bob Filner (D-CA) told the *Post* that Nicholson has been “a victim of an administration that had misplaced priorities,” adding that the timing of the secretary’s departure is unfortunate due to the challenges the VA currently faces.

Despite the ongoing controversies, the VA under Nicholson’s leadership has been recognized for achievements such as its innovative electronic health record system. Nicholson’s contributions to the VA have included hiring new patient care advocates, outreach coordinators, and suicide prevention counselors; creating the blue ribbon Genomic Research Advisory Committee, the Advisory Committee on OIF/OEF Veterans and Families, and the Office of Operations, Security, and Preparedness; approving 82 new community-based outpatient clinics; initiating efforts to reduce the rate of diabetes in veterans and eradicate *Staphylococcus* infections in VA hospitals; and establishing a multicampus nursing academy to address the nationwide nursing shortage. He also led the President’s Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes, which made 25 recommendations for improving VA benefits and services.

A decorated U.S. Army veteran of the Vietnam War, Nicholson left the military as a colonel in the Army Reserves after 30 years of military service. He went on to practice law and establish Nicholson Enterprises, Inc., a residential community development company. In January 1997, he was elected chair of the Republican National Committee and, prior to his nomination as VA secretary in 2004, he was the United States ambassador to the Holy See.

Army Launches PTSD/TBI Education Campaign

On July 17, the U.S. Army announced the start of its Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (MTBI) Chain Teaching Program. Through this program, the army aims to educate more than one million active duty, Reserve, and National Guard soldiers by mid October on the symptoms and effects of PTSD and MTBI. The program uses a “chain teaching” method, in which commanders educate their subordinates, who then train their subordinates, and so on, until all soldiers have received the required training. According to Lieutenant General James L. Campbell, director of the U.S. Army staff, the program’s goal is to combat the perception that seeking help for these conditions represents a weakness.

Participants will be instructed in small groups, and the program will include a Family Readiness Group version designed to educate the spouses and family members of soldiers. Training materials and information about the program are available online (<http://www.behavioralhealth.army.mil/chainteaching/index.html>). ●