



Federal Health Matters

Controversial E-mail Triggers Doubts About VA PTSD Policies

On March 20, a psychologist team leader from the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) program at the Olin E. Teague Veterans Center (OETVC), Temple, TX, sent an e-mail to fellow staff members suggesting they “refrain from giving [veterans] a diagnosis of PTSD straight out.” Instead, the psychologist, Norma Perez, advised her colleagues to consider an initial diagnosis of adjustment disorder, with the need to rule out PTSD. The reasons given in the e-mail included an increase in “compensation seeking veterans” and a lack of time to perform “the extensive testing that should be done to determine PTSD.”

After the nonprofit advocacy organizations Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington and VoteVets.org made the e-mail public on May 15, Senate VA Committee Chair Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI) sent a letter to VA Secretary James B. Peake stating, “the suggestion that diagnoses of PTSD should be avoided due to cost and time considerations is deeply troubling, and merits close investigation.” Peake issued a statement that called the e-mail “inappropriate” and said it had been “repudiated at the highest level of our health care organization.” He also told the *Washington Post* that Perez had been “counseled” about her remarks and had apologized for them. Although a May 23 report by National Public Radio (NPR) said Perez had been reassigned from the PTSD clinic, she remained employed by the VA at press time.

Despite Peake’s assurances that the e-mail does not represent VA policy,

some have expressed doubts that Perez was truly acting on her own initiative. Congressional leaders and veterans’ advocates have called for further investigation into current VA policies regarding the evaluation and diagnosis of PTSD. In his letter to Peake, Akaka cited two VA compensation and pension reports that found most PTSD evaluations lasted 30 to 35 minutes, rather than the three hours recommended by the VA’s *Best Practice Manual for PTSD Compensation and Pension Examinations*. Akaka went on to request that the VA’s Office of the Inspector General (OIG) immediately review the pattern of PTSD diagnosis and compensation and pension decisions at the OETVC and the role the VA’s guidelines may have played in these decisions. According to the NPR report, the OIG has initiated an investigation of the OETVC.

Akaka’s letter also asked that experts from the VA National Center for PTSD study the following in a “statistically valid national sample” of cases: (1) the amount of time spent on PTSD examinations; (2) the adequacy of these examinations, including the need for additional tests; (3) the number of cases in which a “rule out PTSD” diagnosis was given; and (4) whether an alternate diagnosis was made when evidence suggested a PTSD diagnosis would be more appropriate. Furthermore, he requested that the VA provide the Senate VA Committee with all records dating from January 1, 2001 on any formal or informal guidance that was given to staff regarding PTSD diagnosis. To avoid future controversies, Akaka advised that top VA officials issue clear and appropriate guidance to VHA and Veterans Benefits Administration staff involved with PTSD examinations.

VA Appoints Independent Gulf War Advisory Committee

On May 13, VA Secretary James B. Peake announced the creation of a new committee to advise the VA on issues relevant to veterans of the first Gulf War, which took place between August 1990 and February 1991. The 14-member, independent panel is comprised of Gulf War veterans and their surviving family members, veterans of other conflicts, representatives from veterans service organizations, and medical experts. According to Peake, the new committee “will ensure that VA benefits and programs adapt to the needs of these veterans, just as our services have adapted for veterans of other conflicts.”

Charles Cragin, a retired U.S. Navy captain, will chair the new committee. Cragin has held several government leadership positions over the span of his career, including acting under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness and chair of the VA Board of Veterans’ Appeals. The other committee members bring with them a wide range of experiences in the military, medical, governmental, and academic fields. The committee plans to hold its first meeting this month and expects to complete its work within 18 months. The meetings will be open to the public.

The new committee does not replace the Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans’ Illnesses, which was created by Congress in 1998 and appointed by former VA Secretary Anthony J. Principi in 2002. This committee will continue to oversee health research relating to Gulf War veterans. ●