



Federal Health Matters

VA SCAN Health Initiative Launched

A new initiative, VA SCAN (Specialty Care Access Network) is designed to help providers at VA medical centers access innovative specialty care using the latest updates in technology and services. The initiative, which is in response to a directive from Secretary of the VA Eric Shinseki, is sponsored through the Office of Specialty Care and the Office of Specialty Care Transformation under the leadership of Drs. Rajiv Jain and Glenn Graham.

The program will implement specialty consultation, and provider and Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) education. It is expected to add specialties that include chronic diseases of critical importance, such as hepatitis C, chronic pain management, and diabetes, all of which will be easily accessible via the Internet to primary care physicians in the VISN 1-4 regions.

The initial phase of the project will include the establishment of telemedicine programs in 4 VISNs located in the mid-Atlantic and northeast. The area would include about 157 community-based outpatient clinic locations. These programs would enable patients to receive state-of-the-art specialty care from trusted clinicians in their own communities who can consult with an integrated “knowledge network” through the use of high-resolution telemedicine video equipment.

The objectives of the program are to encourage the development of evidence-based medicine; improve patient outcomes; offer greater specialty care availability; promote collaboration with primary care clinicians; increase provider and patient satisfac-

tion; advance best practice guidelines; and present educational programs.

DoD/VA Achieve Milestone

The number of shared patients for whom the DoD and VA have exchanged computerized outpatient medication information recently crested the 1 million mark.

The DoD and VA entered into a partnership in 2006 to employ a Clinical Data Repository/Health Data Repository (CHDR) system that generates outpatient pharmacy and medication allergy data for shared patients that can be exchanged between the 2 agencies' health care systems. The computable data can then be divided into fields that can be sorted, rather than provided as unsortable text. Medical records and patient health care histories are stored and maintained in a centralized repository at each agency, allowing DoD providers to see an overview of medications from DoD military treatment facilities and retail pharmacy networks, VA facilities, and DoD and VA mail order pharmacies.

The DoD began to automatically identify patients in both systems in 2008 and set the Active Dual Consumer (ADC) marker to identify patients who have received treatment at both DoD and VA medical centers. The marker was set on approximately 100 patients daily. At the start of the program, this process was completed manually with an ADC marker identifying those patients who had received health care from both departments in the past 36 months. Dual consumers are patients eligible to receive health care under both DoD and VA health plans, or are patients assigned to a joint venture site.

However, the system was upgraded in 2010 with the release of CHDR 2.0, and by mid-2010 was applying markers to about 3,500 patients a day who were receiving health care from both systems. The departments originally sought a goal of identifying 850,000 ADCs by September 2011. However, that mark was passed in May, and the 1 million mark was achieved on June 24.

DoD Mental Health Services Go High Tech

It is estimated that 87 million Americans reside where health care is hard to acquire. Of these, up to 25% of veterans screen positive for mental health concerns. The question has been: “How do we reach these individuals in an efficient and timely manner?”

The answer may have been provided at the first-ever live Introduction to Telemental Health Delivery Workshop at the National Center for Telehealth and Technology's, or T2, headquarters on Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington State. An innovative new technology is being studied that offers mental health services from a distance using videoconferencing technology.

The DoD has been increasing its emphasis on remote technology in mental health care for the past several years. The intention of the program is to develop a knowledge base so that health care providers can offer care even when their patients are in remote and difficult-to-access regions of the country. Emphasis has also increased on better serving those who reside in areas where mental health care professionals are in short supply. The technology can be used in an

array of ways, from treating posttraumatic stress disorder and depression to wellness and resiliency interventions.

As the program evolves, psychologists at T2 hope to provide additional training sessions and expand them to reach providers at different levels.

Veterans With PTSD May Receive Full Benefits

More than a 1,000 veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, who are experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), would receive lifetime disability retirement benefits, such as military health insurance, under the terms of a settlement recently reached between the government and the veterans. The settlement must be approved by a judge to be final.

The settlement also affects another 1,000 veterans who already had disability retirement benefits, but were wrongfully denied a 50% disability rating for PTSD. All of the veterans affected by the settlement would potentially receive new monthly disability compensation.

The settlement is the result of a class action lawsuit filed in 2008. Veterans who filed the lawsuit were medically discharged because of PTSD and were subsequently denied benefits that they were legally entitled to receive.

The military is required under law to provide a disability rating of at least 50% to troops discharged for PTSD. However, the veterans who filed the suit claimed they received a disability rating less than that. As part of the lawsuit, the military in January 2010 said it would expedite their review of the cases. However, attorneys for the veterans claimed 1 of the boards reviewing the cases was moving so slowly, it was going to take 7 years for all the cases to be reviewed, which led to the settlement talks.

As a result of the settlement, veterans will receive benefits that include entitlement to lifetime military disability retirement payments retroactive to the date of discharge. They will also receive eligibility to apply for Combat-Related Special Compensation; lifetime military health care (TRICARE) for the veteran, his or her spouse, and their children until at least age 18; lifetime commissary and military postexchange privileges; and eligibility to purchase life insurance coverage through the Survivor Benefit Plan.

Each of the veterans in the suit was released from the military between 2003 and 2008.

Use of VA Dental Program for Homeless Veterans Increasing

The Homeless Veterans Dental Program (HVDP), established by the VA in 1992, has seen a sharp increase in the use of these services over the past several years. Funded through the VA Office of Dentistry, the purpose of the HVDP is to increase the accessibility of quality dental care to homeless veteran patients and to help assure success in VA-sponsored and VA-partnership homeless rehabilitation programs throughout the country.

The need has been so great recently in the Baltimore region that officials at the VA Maryland Health Care System contacted the Maryland dental school for assistance. Since late 2006, students, residents, and faculty have answered no fewer than 1,110 referrals for veterans, or nearly half of all those treated through the program locally. The Baltimore-area budget for the dental program increased \$300,000 in 2011, which is more than triple the amount since the time the partnership began. Across the nation, the growth has been similar, with the VA spend-

ing \$26.5 million in 2011 on dental services for homeless veterans.

According to the VA, the dental needs of homeless veterans are well documented. In surveys ranking the highest unmet needs for homeless veterans, dental care was consistently ranked by homeless veterans themselves as 1 of their top 3 unmet needs, along with permanent housing and child care. Dental problems, including pain or missing teeth, can be tremendous obstacles in seeking and securing employment. Veterans report improvements in perceived health and self-esteem following the dental care they receive.

Persons who would like to receive information regarding the HVDP in their area should contact the nearest VA homeless coordinator.

Tech Firm to Develop Lab Chip

A technology development and commercialization firm is the recipient of a \$70,000 contract from the U.S. Army to come up with a "lab-on-a-chip" technology that identifies biological hazards in complex matrices.

The chip, which will be developed by ADA Technologies, will isolate and identify simultaneously a variety of hazards, including viruses, toxins, spores, and vegetative bacteria, in areas such as soil, food, water, and blood. At the present time, the process requires laboratory technicians to perform a series of steps on large sample sizes to receive sufficient material for biological hazard analysis and identification.

The new chip will reduce the time needed to perform these steps, as well as increase efficiency. Additionally, it can be performed by a greater number of technicians regardless of training expertise. ●