



# Federal Health Matters

## PTSD Smartphone Application Wins FCC Award

The VA and the DoD joined forces to provide a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) smartphone application, and they are 1 of 7 recipients of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman's Awards for Advancements in Accessibility. The FCC Chairman's Awards was designed to encourage innovation in communication-related areas as well as annually recognize those outstanding efforts in the public and private sectors. Public-private partnership efforts to advance accessibility are also recognized. Julia Hoffman, PsyD, mobile applications lead, VA National Center for PTSD, said, "One of our key goals for the PTSD Coach app all along has been accessibility. Our team works to get useful tools to veterans whenever and wherever they need them. We are thrilled to have this recognition that we have hit our target."

## Oncologist Communication Feedback Improves Patient Trust

A study by researchers with the VA and university partners indicated that doctors who are shown recordings of their interactions with patients may improve their ability to empathize and communicate effectively.

Individual feedback and video clips modeling communication skills were provided to the 48 study participants (composed of both VA and non-VA doctors).

Four to 8 oncologist visits with patients with advanced cancer were audio-recorded. Afterward, all the doctors attended an hour-long lecture and discussion about how to communicate effectively. By random assignment, half

received a CD-ROM communication skills tutorial in addition to personal feedback and video clips; the other half received no further information. The CD provided information about how to recognize and respond to patients' negative emotions and empathetic discussion of their prognosis.

The researchers wrote, "This simple technology can improve oncologists' empathic behavior and, consequently, patient trust, leading to improved adherence to therapy." Subsequent recordings of all oncologists' patient visits revealed that the CD-trained group responded empathetically to patients' concerns or fears twice as often as the group who received no training.

## VA Sharing Rule With DoD Updated to Enhance Patient Care

With an eye toward improving patient outcomes, the VA announced that it is amending an agency rule in the Code of Federal Register (CFR) to remove a restriction on information sharing about treatment for specific medical conditions with the DoD. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki said, "VA and DoD clinicians must have the most accurate and comprehensive data available to ensure they provide the highest quality care possible. We have discovered that, particularly in this age of electronic health records, this regulatory restriction created an impediment to maximizing this exchange of information."

The restrictive VA provision was removed to enhance the VA's collaboration with the DoD to provide veterans with better and timelier treatment, services, and benefits. The restriction being removed is one that is not required by the statute, 38 United States

Code (USC) §7332 and one that is not consistent with the intent and purpose of that statute. That statute was enacted before other privacy laws, in order to protect against the unauthorized disclosure of VA medical records about treatment for drug abuse, alcoholism or alcohol abuse, HIV infection, and sickle cell anemia.

## Report Released on Gulf War Task Force

The VA will refer to the Department of Gulf War Illnesses Task Force's draft of a comprehensive report to address the concerns of veterans who were deployed during the Gulf War in 1990 and 1991, according to Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. In addition to addressing Gulf War veteran issues, Shinseki said, "we will be applying lessons learned from this report to veterans of all eras."

Health care delivery improvement for Gulf War veterans is this year's report focus. Modifications to clinical care models, the most critical point of service the VA provides, is one of the most substantial additions. Better linkages now exist between specialty knowledge and services at the basic point of care. Since the previous year's report, the task force has examined, evaluated, designated, and adjusted the initial road map outlined in last year's report. The VA's designated steps for improvement of care and services to Gulf War I veterans are becoming part of the culture and operations. To address some Gulf War I veteran health concerns, 2 new positions have been added in the Office of Research and Development for deployment and Desert Shield and Desert Storm health-related issues. These positions are enhancing research efforts for Gulf War veterans.

In addition to strengthening partnerships and medical surveillance to address the potential health impacts from active duty, the VA also uses social media to improve communication with Gulf War veterans.

## TRICARE Patients Address Pharmacy Costs by Using Home Delivery

Patients are now receiving their 90-day prescription medications through a mail-order option. With home delivery available, the annual rate of retail pharmacy growth slowed from about 7% in 2010 to less than 2% through July 2011. Automatic prescription refills are available to patients who use home delivery service. An additional incentive exists to switch to home delivery effective October 1, 2011, with TRICARE offering zero co-pays for generic medications obtained through home delivery. "Patients realize significant savings by getting regular prescriptions through home delivery," said retiring TRICARE Management Activity Deputy Director Rear Adm. Christine Hunter, "and so does the Department of Defense." More information can be found at <http://www.tricare.mil/pharmacy>.

## U.S. Olympic Committee Awarded \$7.5 Million by VA

This grant, which builds on the \$7.5 million the VA awarded to the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) in 2010 to begin the program, is designed to provide recreation and sports activities for disabled veterans and disabled members of the Armed Forces. The terms dictate that VA funds are provided to USOC member organizations, Paralympic Sports Clubs, and

veteran and military organizations to start community-based, physical activity programs for disabled veterans and disabled members of the armed forces. Nearby adaptive sporting events can be located on the U.S. Paralympics Web site: [www.usparalympics.org](http://www.usparalympics.org). The VA was authorized by Public Law 110-389 to award grants to the USOC to plan, manage, and implement an adaptive sports program as well as to establish an Office of National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events. This office gives information, tools, and resources to VA clinicians to help them highlight the benefits of adaptive sports. Collaborating with VA clinical personnel enables the office to reach disabled veterans and service members while they undergo recovery and rehabilitation.

## TRICARE Management Activity Addresses Potential Patient Data Breach

A possibility exists that a loss of computer tapes by Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) has placed patient data at risk, but there is no evidence of third-party access. An analysis reveals that any chance the data were compromised is low. Nevertheless, TRICARE Management Activity (TMA) is taking proactive measures to ensure that potentially affected patients are kept informed and protected.

On September 14, 2011, TMA learned that SAIC (a contractor for TMA) reported a theft of 12 computer tapes containing personally identifiable and protected health information of 4.9 million military and hospital patients in Texas or exam results sent to Texas military hospitals. The tapes may contain names, Social Security numbers, addresses, phone numbers, clinical notes, laboratory tests, and

prescriptions. The tapes do not contain any financial data, such as credit card or bank account information.

"These measures exceed the industry standard to protect against the risk of identity theft," said Brigadier General W. Bryan Gamble, TMA deputy director. "We take very seriously our responsibility to offer patients peace of mind that their credit and quality of life will be unaffected by this breach."

The SAIC is to provide 1 year of credit monitoring and restoration services to concerned patients, as directed by TMA, and an analysis of all available data will be conducted by SAIC to assist TMA in determining whether identity theft occurs as a result of the data breach. The Federal Trade Commission suggests steps individuals can take to protect their personal information: <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/idtheft/idth04.shtm>.

## COLA for Veterans Passed

The 2012 cost of living adjustment (COLA) has been passed by the U.S. House of Representatives for veterans who receive compensation for service-connected disabilities. Rates of dependency and indemnity compensation of veterans who died as a result of service are affected by COLA, which is tied to the Consumer Price Index and also adjusts Social Security recipient benefits. Representative Jeff Miller, chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, stated, "I am very happy that during these tough economic times, we are able to provide our wounded veterans with a Cost of Living Adjustment this year." Miller added, "Due to low inflation the past two years, our veterans have not received an increase. This additional income will help them make ends meet in the coming year." Since 1976, Congress has passed a COLA for veterans every year. ●