



Federal Health Matters

Military Medical Center Promotes Eye-Injury Research

February 2012 marks the opening of the new headquarters of the Department of Defense/Department of Veterans Affairs Vision Center of Excellence at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

According to Army Colonel (Dr.) Donald Gagliano, the facility's director, the goal of the facility is to promote research and initiatives to prevent eye injuries and better diagnose and treat those conditions. Gagliano explained that eye injuries are often overlooked, but they are one of the signature war wounds of the last 10 years. Gagliano stated, "The reality is that it is very difficult for us to know exactly what the prevalence of eye injury is, because it is often intertwined with other polytrauma." He said that officials estimate that 13% to 22% of all casualties between 2002 and 2010 have incurred eye injuries or trauma. Before the military mandated the use of ballistic glasses for troops, Gagliano estimated that eye-injury rates were as high as 29% among casualties. These injuries are largely under-reported, especially when caused by explosions that inflict other, highly visible, and frequently life-threatening wounds.

Military Announces New Breast Cancer Vaccine

The cancer vaccine E-75 is a result of more than a decade of research and testing. E-75 is scheduled to move to its final phase of testing to earn FDA approval, according to Army Colonel (Dr.) George E. Peoples, director and

principal investigator for the Cancer Vaccine Development Program at San Antonio Military Medical Center, San Antonio, Texas, and deputy director and chief of surgical oncology at the U.S. Military Cancer Institute, Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

The team is hopeful about this vaccine and its lifesaving potential for breast cancer survivors, especially since breast cancer is the most prevalent type of cancer seen among military beneficiaries in the hospital here, said Peoples. In January 2012, Peoples stated, "We've made a commitment to take care of active-duty personnel, spouses, and retirees. And cancer is a notable problem among beneficiaries." E-75 is slashing breast cancer recurrence rates and providing some survivors a better chance of a cancer-free future.

Peoples also noted that cancer vaccines usually target some protein or antigen expressed on cancer cells. Peoples explained that the protein E-75 targets human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2/neu), commonly over-expressed in breast cancer cells. "The idea is to train the immune system to recognize that protein or piece of protein that's highly expressed on cancer cells, but not on normal cells," he said. "That way the immune system can differentiate what's abnormal and normal. If the immune system can recognize it, it marks it for death, basically."

VA Recently Deployed 20 New Mobile Vet Centers

To increase access to readjustment counseling services for veterans and their families in rural and underserved areas, VA deployed 20 additional mobile Vet Centers from the production

facility of Farber Specialty Vehicles. "Mobile Vet Centers allow VA to bring the many services our Vet Centers offer veterans to all communities, wherever they are needed," said VA Under Secretary for Health Robert A. Petzel. "VA is committed to expanding access to VA health care and benefits for veterans and their families, and these 20 new vehicles demonstrate that continued commitment."

VA launched the new vehicles to their destinations across the continental United States, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico in an event attended by Petzel, U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio, representatives of the Ohio congressional delegation, and veterans service organizations. These custom vehicles are equipped with confidential counseling space and a new communication package and travel to communities to extend the VA's reach to veterans, service members, and their families, particularly those living in remote or rural communities.

Veterans With Undiagnosed Illnesses Granted 5-Year Extension on Applications

Persian Gulf War veterans with undiagnosed illnesses have an additional 5 years to apply for benefits from VA. "Not all wounds of war are fully understood," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "When there is uncertainty about the connection between a medical problem and military service, veterans are entitled to the benefit of the doubt."

The old rule required undiagnosed illnesses used to establish eligibility for VA benefits to be made apparent by December 31, 2011; the new rule pushes that deadline to December 31, 2016. ●