

Veterans' health matters

To Our Veterans: We Salute You!

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In December of 2003, I was asked by my commander at the California National Guard to cover the coming-home ceremony of an aviation unit of the California National Guard in Stockton.

During the ceremony, I saw a little boy about three or four years old standing off and away from the crowd, staring at the soldiers. I asked him if his Daddy was in the crowd and he said, "Yes, sir." I told him his Daddy would really like it if he saluted him.

I went on to ask, "Do you know how to salute?" He said, "Yes, sir, my Daddy taught me how." He raised his right hand

and gave his Daddy and all the soldiers a salute I will never forget. All at once, the soldiers in the hangar began to smile, laugh and then started clapping. It was such a priceless moment.

But, that's not the reason I'm writing this story. I decided it was time to prepare a poster using that image. I remember John Kennedy Jr. saluting his

father's coffin that terrible day in November 1963, and I thought it was a moment I'll never forget. Years later, when that image is shown on TV, it brings back many of the same feelings I had the first time I saw it.

As a member of the military, I'm often approached by people thanking me for my service. It embarrasses me a little, because I don't desire that sort of adoration. There are so many others who have done more to deserve praise. So, I thought it was time to remember my brothers and sisters in arms and develop a poster that would somehow thank "our most cherished citizens" for their service. I used the "John, John" photo. They can never hear it enough: "Thank you for your service!"

"Do you know how to salute?" He said, "Yes, sir, my Daddy taught me how." He raised his right hand and gave his Daddy and all the soldiers a salute I will never forget.

Today, a VA operator called me and told me a patient was on the line, and wanted to speak to the "guy who took the John, John" photo. I took the call; it was from Army SFC Calvin McCowan who served in Vietnam from 1967 to 1970. He said that the day he was admitted to the hospital, his family was with him and saw, as he called it, "the John, John" poster.

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THEY CAN NEVER HEAR IT ENOUGH.
"THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE!"

 Department of
Veterans Affairs

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Improving Service for GWOT Veterans

Military personnel returning from OEF-OIF can look forward to more timely receipt of benefits, better information and more streamlined processes, thanks to revised federal procedures announced recently by Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson, who chaired a presidential task force.

"The federal government must be responsive and efficient in delivering our benefits and services to these heroes," Nicholson said. "They should not have to fight bureaucratic red tape for benefits earned by their courageous service."

The task force specifically targeted health care, benefits, employment, education, housing and outreach activities. Its report includes 25 recommendations to improve delivery of federal services to returning military men and women. Recommendations focus on increasing awareness of available benefits among service members and their families and improving the process for receiving them.

Department Cited Eight Years in a Row

Continuing its commitment to give veterans a clear, meaningful view of how the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is performing, VA was recently rated by an independent research center as having one of the best annual performance reports in the federal sector for the eighth year in a row.

"The findings of this prestigious research center show that we're among the best in the federal sector at providing meaningful information to the American

public about our operations and performance," said Secretary Nicholson.

Since 2000, the Mercatus Center of George Mason University has examined the performance and accountability reports issued annually by federal agencies. This year, VA tied for second-best, and also tied for having the highest score in transparency, an example of its commitment to provide information that is useful and easy to understand.

VA Leading the Way in TBI Care

The VA is continuing to adapt its programs to meet the needs of veterans from the Global War on Terror, with a variety of new services in place or underway. The latest innovations for treating traumatic brain injury (TBI) in the newest generation of combat veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan include mandatory TBI training for all VA health care professionals, screening all recent combat vets for TBI, and creating an outside panel of experts to review VA's TBI services.

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) can be caused without any visible injuries when explosives jar the brain inside the skull. Symptoms can range from headaches, irritability, and sleep disorders, to memory problems and depression.

VA has developed a mandatory TBI course for all health care professionals. The course teaches primary care providers ways to diagnose TBI in patients who might not otherwise be aware they suffer from it. A new program to screen all patients who served in the combat theaters of Iraq or Afghanistan for TBI is also underway, and will be offered at all VA medical centers.

Eye Disease Screening for Diabetics

Many veterans with diabetes are getting initial screening for possible eye disease during their Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) primary care appointments, thanks to a national tele-retinal imaging program now in place at the majority of VA hospitals and clinics.

This new procedure, which screens patients for diabetic retinopathy, does not take the place of a dilated eye exam. Veterans with known retinopathy or laser treatment will be seen in eye clinics, along with high risk patients such as those with pregnancy or renal disease. The new procedure is a good initial way, however, to identify patients at risk for visual loss from diabetes.

VA Increases Support for Medical Education

The VA, which already helps train nearly half of the physicians in the nation, will increase its support for medical education in the 2007-2008 academic year, adding 2,000 positions for advanced residency training over the next five years.

Through its affiliations with medical schools and universities, VA is the largest provider of health care training in the United States. More than 31,000 medical residents and 16,000 medical students receive some of their training in VA each year. Currently, 130 VA medical facilities are affiliated with 107 of the nation's 126 medical schools.

As the nation's largest integrated health care system, VA provided care last year to 5.3 million veterans at more than 1,400 sites of care. ■

VA Health Care Called Best in Nation

In the wake of so much recent negative publicity about Walter Reed Army Medical Center, VA health care facilities around the country have been flooded with inquiries from media representatives about the quality of care they deliver to our nation's veterans.

VA officials were quick to point out that military hospitals such as Walter Reed are operated by the Department of Defense, and not by the Department of Veterans Affairs, which has responsibility for all of the VA's health care facilities.

In a memorandum to VA Medical Center directors, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson noted that "A variety of independent organizations have ranked the world-class health care provided by the Veterans Health Administration as the best in the United States."

Attached to his message was a news release from the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), in which Bradley S. Barton, National Commander of the 1.3 million-member DAV, noted that "the VA

consistently sets the benchmark for patient satisfaction, according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index developed by the University of Michigan Business School."

Throughout VISN 21, media coverage has been extensive—and very positive. Newspaper articles, along with numerous television and radio programs, have featured interviews with wounded veterans, who

consistently speak highly of the care they've received.

For example, on the Web site of ABC's *NEWS10* in Sacramento, reporter Dave Marquis wrote that: "Vets treated at the Sacramento VA Medical Center at Mather have little but praise for the state of the art facility that they say provides top-notch care." A typical quote came from Vietnam Navy veteran Walter Chesser, who said: "This hospital is outstanding."

Joint Commission Inspections

One very important measure of the quality of care provided by health care organizations is accreditation by The Joint Commission, which evaluates and accredits nearly 15,000 health care organizations and programs in the United States.

The Joint Commission, which conducts periodic inspections of

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health care facilities, is the nation's predominant standards-setting and accrediting body, and has been accrediting hospitals for more than 50 years. Its accreditation is a nationwide seal of approval that

indicates a hospital meets high performance standards.

All VISN 21 facilities have long earned Joint Commission accreditation. Recently, Fresno, Palo Alto, Sacramento and San Francisco hospitals had their unannounced Joint Commission inspections, and all received full three-year accreditations. ■

We Salute You

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He told me it brought back many memories, and he especially liked the message of thanking our troops for their service. He asked if he could buy the photo from me. I told him no, but said I'd give him a copy.

I prepared a poster and delivered it to him in his room just prior to his discharge from the Sacramento VA Medical Center. His eyes filled with tears and he shook my hand and said, "You've made me and my family very happy. I have a grandson who wanted this photo, and now we have the poster. It's a cherished gift."

It goes without saying that my heart was filled with emotion as well and, as I was leaving, I said to SFC McCowan: "Thank you for your service."

I love this job and the work I'm so privileged to do.



VA facility highlights

pacific islands

Environment of Care Service in the Forefront

In the words of celebrity cook Emeril Lagasse, “Bam! Let’s Kick It Up a Notch,” the VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS), recently moved environment of care issues to the forefront with the hiring of new personnel. They are Safety Officer Albert Zadio, Industrial Hygienist Raymond Welch, and Infection Control Practitioner

James Reisen. Combining forces with the facility’s new Associate Director, Kalautie JangDhari, the team has made major strides in raising the bar relative to environment of care issues, as evidenced by very productive administrative rounds throughout our PIHCS. Administrative rounds are conducted by the Associate Director and other top management personnel, as a means of identifying quality of

care issues that need improvement, and to ensure our veterans receive the best medical attention possible.

As further evidence of the hard work being accomplished by VAPIHCS staff, a recent customer satisfaction survey rated outpatient overall quality with a 79.2 percent score, provider wait time 84.6 percent, and appointment as soon as wanted for established and new patients 80.3 percent. ■

northern california

Facility Marks Tenth Anniversary

Ten years ago, the VA constructed a new outpatient clinic, and its first free-standing, long-term care facility, on the former site of the Martinez VA Medical Center. Following the 1991 Loma Prieta earthquake, the Medical Center was considered seismically unsafe and was closed. The rebuilding included the Martinez VA Outpatient Clinic and an adjacent 120-bed, long-term facility known as the Center for Rehabilitation and Extended Care (CREC).

This past year, the CREC celebrated its 10-year anniversary with a ceremony and tour that included approximately 300 community members and leaders, elected officials, and members of fraternal, community and veterans’ service organizations.

The CREC offers veterans a wide range of inpatient geriatric and extended care, including Clinical Neurological Services, for patients with neurological disorders; Subacute Care, for patients requiring skilled care and monitoring below the acute care level; Respite Care, to give

family caregivers a period of relief as well as health care education; Palliative Care, to assist with the physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs of patients and family members during the terminal phase of an incurable illness; and Restorative & Rehabilitative Care, to facilitate independence and self-care for patients who no longer require hospitalization.

For information on applying for CREC services and programs, veterans and their families may contact the Admissions Coordinator at 925-370-4704. ■

san francisco

VA’s Highest Scientific Award Honors SFVAMC Researcher

Dr. Michael Weiner, a pioneering brain imaging researcher at the San Francisco VA Medical Center (SFVAMC), is the recipient of the 2006 William S. Middleton Award from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The award is the VA’s highest scientific honor and is given in recognition of outstanding achievement in biomedical research.

Dr. Weiner is being recognized for his “exemplary service to the VA and to the biomedical profession,” as well as for his contributions to the field of clinical magnetic resonance imaging. Currently, he is the principal investigator of the SFVAMC Neuroscience Center of Excellence (a research collaboration between the VA, the Department of Defense, and the Northern California Institute for Research and Education), that focuses on improving diagnosis and treatment of traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress

disorder, and other neurological conditions faced by combat veterans.

SFVAMC has the largest medical research program in the national VA system, with more than 200 research scientists, all of whom are also faculty members at UCSF. ■



National Days of Recognition Celebrated at VACCHCS

On April 9, 2007, 14 former Prisoners of War from Central California were honored in a ceremony at the VA Central California Healthcare System (VACCHCS). John Wallace, CBS Morning Co-Host, was MC, and the keynote speaker was Colonel Ryan Orian, Vice Commander of the 144th Fighter Wing California Air National Guard. Colonel Orian had just returned from flying the F-16 in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On April 19, more than 150 women veterans attended the VA

Women Veterans Recognition Day Program at VACCHCS. Keynote speakers included women veterans from WWII, the Korean War, Vietnam War, Persian Gulf and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Of special interest were the remarks of LTJG Katie Hagen, Surface Warfare Officer, who is on leave from her assignment on a U.S. Navy destroyer in the Persian Gulf.

On April 21, more than 225 volunteers were honored at the Tropical Paradise themed ceremony for the National Voluntary Service Week VAVS Recognition Luncheon. Two volunteers received special



recognition for their milestone achievements: Louise Beaton for serving more than 53,050 hours with 44 years of service; and Mary Sinopoli for 53 years of service and 28,600 hours. Other top honors went to Art McClelland and Maxine Williams, both at 95 years young, with 48 and 49 years of service. ■

Patient Environment and Facility Improvement Project Updates

VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System is committed to continually improving the accessibility to and environment in which we provide health care to our nation's veterans. Numerous projects are underway which will allow the facility to enhance the entire health care process.

These projects include: a new emergency room of approximately 7,700 square feet; a second state-of-the-art CT scanner; upgrading the Kirman Street entrance to the hospital; upgrading the campus-wide fire alarm system; doubling the number of dental operatories from three to six; opening the new Fallon VA Community Clinic

in July 2007, and finally, redesign work in the Transitional Care Unit to bring about a more home-like atmosphere for the residents.

Our goal is to provide veterans with the best possible medical care in the most up-to-date facilities, and we've made great strides in that direction. ■

Modesto Clinic Remodeling Improves Patient Care

The VA Palo Alto Health Care System has completed a major remodel of the ambulatory care suite at the VA Modesto Clinic. The changes made will help the primary medicine care team improve the veteran's health care experience.

Using similar design measures to those employed in the new VA Stockton Clinic, we put together a

suite of offices and exam rooms for the provider and nursing. Each provider is given an office and two exam rooms. Nursing is provided an intake room, called a pod, to service the veterans from two providers.

The combination of rooms eliminates multiple interruptions in the delivery of care. The provider doesn't have to wait for a veteran to be placed in an exam room. Nursing is freed from multiple logging in and out of our electronic records and can screen

the patient's health care issues in private. The time captured can be reinvested in more direct care of the veteran.

Hoping to avoid long waits and standing room only, veterans used to arrive early in the morning to get their blood drawn. Now, the VA Modesto Clinic has two large draw stations and a larger waiting area to handle the early morning rush. Our phlebotomists have been seen smiling a little more. ■

A Laughing Matter: What's for Breakfast?

A guy goes into a diner one morning and tells the waitress, who's new: "I want three flat tires, a pair of headlights, and two running boards."

The waitress, not wanting to appear stupid, goes to the kitchen and says to the cook. "This guy just ordered three flat tires, a pair of headlights and two running boards. What does he think this is, an auto parts store?"

"No," the cook says. "Three flat tires means three pancakes, a pair of headlights is two eggs sunny side up, and running boards are two slices of crisp bacon."

"Oh," says the waitress. She thinks about this and then brings the customer a bowl of beans.

The guy says, "What are the beans for?"

The waitress replies, "I thought while you were



waiting for the flat tires, headlights and running boards, you might want to gas up." ■

WORD SEARCH



- ACCREDITATION
- APPOINTMENT
- AWARENESS
- CEMETERY

- COMMITMENT
- FEATURE
- HEALTHEVET
- HEROES

- IMPROVEMENT
- INFORMATION
- MEANINGFUL
- MONUMENT

- QUALITY
- RECOGNIZE
- SALUTE
- SATISFACTION

New National Shrine Will Be Tribute to America's Veterans

On April 22, VA held a dedication ceremony to officially open its 124th national cemetery, the Sacramento Valley VA National Cemetery, located in Dixon, Calif.

“VA national cemeteries honor our commitment to America’s veterans,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson. “They are national shrines to those who have served this nation in uniform.”



The ceremony included remarks by VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs William Tuerk and local elected officials. The dedication plaque was unveiled and full military honors were performed with a flyover from Travis Air Force Base of C-17, C-5 and KC-10 aircraft. The ceremony was concluded with the playing of *Taps*.

The 561-acre site is located in Solano County, approximately 27 miles southwest of Sacramento along Interstate 80, between Dixon and Vacaville. Nearly 346,000 veterans and their families live within the service radius of the national cemetery.

Burials began in October 2006, in an area of approximately 14 acres, which includes one committal shelter and three burial sections. That area has

capacity for 8,466 gravesites, consisting of 3,070 pre-placed crypts and 1,642 standard gravesites, as well as 3,754 in-ground cremation gravesites.



Although the cemetery is open for burials, construction will continue until July 2009. When the initial 110-acre construction project is completed, the cemetery will have 17,200 full-casket gravesites, 12,000 pre-placed crypts, a 3,000-unit columbarium for cremated remains, and 765 sites for in-ground cremated remains.

Veterans with a discharge other than dishonorable, their spouses and eligible dependent children, can be buried in a national cemetery. Other burial benefits available for all eligible veterans, regardless of whether they are buried in a national cemetery or a private cemetery, include a burial flag, a Presidential Memorial Certificate and a government headstone or marker.

In the midst of the largest cemetery expansion since the Civil War, VA operates 125 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico, and 33 soldiers’ lots and monument sites. More than three million Americans, including veterans of every war and conflict, are buried in VA’s national cemeteries on more than 16,000 acres of land.

For information on the Sacramento Valley VA National Cemetery, call the cemetery office at 707-693-2460. ■

My HealtheVet Program Adding New Features

MMy HealtheVet, VA’s Web-based portal that allows veterans to register and record personal health information and combine it with parts of their electronic health records, is adding new features throughout 2007, which will enable veterans to improve management of their health care.

Aiden Barr, Acting Program Manager for My HealtheVet, said new features being introduced in 2007 will enable veterans who have registered on the web site to add electronic copies of portions of their VA medical records to their personal health records.

Among the newest My HealtheVet features are screening tools for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and alcohol use. The “Healthy Living Centers” provide medical information and tips on healthy eating, physical activity, and smoking and tobacco use cessation. The “Condition Centers” offer information on medical conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and stroke, plus tips on managing those conditions. Information on support groups is also available on the site.

To ensure the security and privacy of their personal health records, veterans must register on the My HealtheVet web portal and complete an “In Person Authentication” (IPA), at their medical facility. Future additions will enable veterans to see their VA appointments, co-pay balances, and copies of chemistry and hematology lab reports.

Veterans can register on the My HealtheVet Web portal at www.myhealth.va.gov. A demonstration account is available to view what the site has to offer. The User ID is **mhvuser**; the password is **mhvdemo#1**. ■

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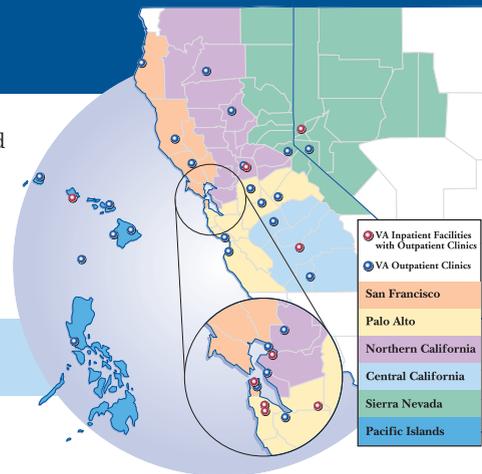
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