

# Veterans' health matters

## VA Medical Facilities Take Lead in Fight Against MRSA

**I**ts formal name is methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus. Better known as MRSA, it's a type of bacteria which is resistant to certain antibiotics, including methicillin and other more common antibiotics, such as oxacillin, penicillin and amoxicillin.

MRSA is an often deadly type of so-called "staph infections," occurring most frequently among individuals in hospitals, nursing homes and other health-care facilities. The most likely candidates for staph infections are those with weakened immune systems.

Because MRSA transmission and infection rates in VA health-care facilities were comparable to the national average, the Veterans Health Administration launched a pilot program in 2006 aimed at significantly reducing infection rates among veterans.

Building on the success of that pilot program, which reduced that staph infection rate by 50 percent, the VA now has tough new screening requirements in place in all of its 153 hospitals.

In addition to emphasizing its commitment to hospital

hygiene and flagging affected patients for special precautions, VA facilities monitor all incoming patients on key units with nasal swabs and cultures for MRSA.

"VA demonstrated that dramatic reductions in MRSA-related infections are possible," said Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gordon H. Mansfield. "VA's completion of our national deployment of these serious prevention measures reinforces VA's stature as one of the safest health-care environments nationally."

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***"Our ability to reduce the number of cases of MRSA infection enhances our ability to provide quality health care for veterans."***

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Recently published data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in collaboration with other researchers

estimated there may be more than 94,000 MRSA cases a year in the United States, associated with 18,650 deaths annually.

"MRSA is a dangerous infection, difficult to eradicate, that can cause pneumonia, wound or bloodstream infections," said Dr. Michael J. Kussman, VA's Under Secretary for Health. "Our ability to reduce the number of cases of MRSA infection enhances our ability to provide quality health care for veterans."

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# VA National News

## VA Announces Grants for Homeless Programs

As the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) marks the 20th anniversary of its homeless program, VA has awarded 46 grants worth more than \$16 million to public and private nonprofit groups to assist homeless veterans.

“For the last 20 years, VA has worked with its community partners to lift veterans out of homelessness,” said Gordon H. Mansfield, Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs. “We are making progress by expanding treatment, rehabilitation and safe transitional housing for our homeless veterans, though more remains to be done.”

Based on VA’s national estimates, the number of homeless veterans on any night has decreased 20 percent during the last six years, and veterans as a percent of the adult homeless population has decreased 10 percent.

This latest round of grants creates 950 beds for homeless veterans, bringing to more than 12,000 the number of VA-funded community-based beds provided by public and community nonprofit and faith-based organizations in 34 states and the District of Columbia.

VA has the largest integrated network of homeless assistance programs in the country. It is the only federal agency providing substantial one-on-one contact with the homeless.

## Restaurant Founder Honored for Business Support of Veterans

Shortly before leaving office, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson presented a Secretary’s Award to Little Caesars’ founder Michael Ilitch in recognition of his advancement of veterans in business

through pizza franchise discounts.

To assist service-disabled veterans who want to open a Little Caesars restaurant, the program waives a \$20,000 franchise fee on the first store, provides \$10,000 credit on the initial equipment order, and provides a variety of marketing support and financing options and other benefits, which can total \$68,000. For other veterans, the fee is reduced by \$5,000 and the credit extended for equipment is \$5,000.

In conjunction with the award ceremony, Ilitch, a Marine Corps veteran, served pizza to homeless veterans at VA headquarters in Washington from Little Caesars’ “Love Kitchen,” a pizza kitchen on wheels that travels across the U.S. and Canada to feed the homeless and disaster survivors.

Veterans are offered business opportunities by a variety of franchisers through the International Franchise Association’s VetFran program. More information is available at [www.franchise.org](http://www.franchise.org), and the VA Center for Veterans Enterprise’s resource site to assist veteran entrepreneurs at [www.vetbiz.gov](http://www.vetbiz.gov).

## VA to Establish Nursing Academy

To address a shortage of nurses across the nation and ensure that veterans continue to receive personalized, world-class care in its facilities, VA has announced creation of a new multi-campus Nursing Academy. The new academy is a virtual organization, with central administration in Washington and teaching at competitively selected nursing schools across the country which partner with VA.

Despite this shortage, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing has reported that more than 42,000 qualified

applicants were turned away from nursing schools in 2006 because of insufficient numbers of faculty, clinical sites, classroom space and clinical mentors.

VA currently provides clinical education to nearly 100,000 health professional trainees annually, including students from more than 600 schools of nursing. Its new five-year, \$40 million pilot program establishes partnerships with 12 nursing schools across the country during the next three years.

VA has one of the largest nursing staffs of any health-care system in the world, with about 61,000 registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, vocational nurses and nursing assistants at the Department’s 153 medical centers and nearly 900 clinics.

Further information about the pilot program can be obtained from VA’s Office of Academic Affiliations web site at [www.va.gov/oa](http://www.va.gov/oa).

## VA Plans PTSD Conference

Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gordon H. Mansfield has announced that the VA will convene a “consensus conference” with the Department of Defense (DoD) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to improve the designs and methodologies all three agencies will use in future research studies regarding Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The conference date and location will be announced separately.

VA staff will work closely with DoD to study how early interventions, such as the Army’s “Battlemind” training and the “Marine Operational Stress Surveillance and Training Program,” both designed to help service members transition from combat back to home, can improve outcomes for veterans with PTSD. ■

# MRSA Questions and Answers

## Fight Against MRSA

### Q: What is MRSA?

A: MRSA stands for Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus. Staphylococcus

(STAFF-ih-low-KOCK-us) aureus (ARE-ee-us) is a type of “super” germ that lives in the nose, on the skin, and on other surfaces that come in contact with the bacteria. In most cases, this “super” germ causes no infection. But in some people, it can cause serious wound and blood infections. MRSA is considered “methicillin resistant” because it does not react to methicillin or other standard medicines. Hospitals and other health-care facilities have been found to be sources of MRSA. However, there have also been cases of MRSA in the community.

### Q: Who gets MRSA infections?

A: People who are at the greatest risk for developing an infection or become colonized are those who:

- are elderly or children;
- are very ill;
- are unable to fight off infection because of a serious disease, such as HIV or diabetes;
- have been recently hospitalized or undergone a surgical procedure.

### Q: How is MRSA primarily spread?

A: MRSA is primarily spread by direct physical contact with a person or object carrying the



bacteria. Objects can include medical equipment, sheets or even a tabletop. In the hospital setting, the most common way MRSA is spread is by health-care workers’ hands.

### Q: Can MRSA be spread in non-health-care facilities, such as community gyms?

A: MRSA is everywhere, so it could very well be living on communal equipment at a gym. The best protection is to always practice good hand hygiene.

### Q: How is MRSA diagnosed?

A: Your health-care practitioner can have a simple test performed. The VHA MRSA Prevention Initiative requires VA facilities to test patients upon admission and discharge with a simple and painless nasal swab test.

### Q: Why is MRSA prevention important?

A: MRSA is responsible for 100,000 U.S. hospitalizations each year. It tremendously increases the total burden of infection for the patient, and increases the risk of death four-fold. These patients also have hospital stays more than two-and-a-half times longer than they otherwise would. ■

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MRSA reflects the broader problem of multi-drug resistant organisms, which are difficult to treat with conventional antibiotics. In addition to hand-washing, isolation of infected patients and the use of gowns to prevent spread, the VA initiative focuses on “culture change” among its health-care workers. In an effort to improve awareness of the threat and make infection prevention a routine component of care during each patient encounter every day.

After the successful pilot program in VA’s Pittsburgh Health Care System, the Department began screening incoming patients to its intensive care units in March 2007. The program has been expanded to other high-risk hospital units, including transplant and spinal cord injury as well as general surgical and medical patient wards.

The national initiative focuses on implementing the VHA MRSA Bundle, which consists of four essential elements:

- Active Surveillance (Admission/Transfer/Discharge Swabbing)
- Aggressive Hand Hygiene
- Contact Precautions
- Cultural Transformation (Leadership and Staff Engagement)

Consistent use of the VHA MRSA Bundle has been shown to markedly reduce MRSA-related infections in the pilot facilities. VHA’s efforts will hopefully serve as a model of effective strategies for other health-care systems in the reduction of MRSA transmission. ■

# VA facility highlights

san francisco

## Bike Riding Vets Support Injured Comrades

The San Francisco VA Medical Center recently hosted actor Jack Scalia and injured veteran bike riders who were taking part in "Operation American Spirit." This was a 1,500-mile bike ride to raise awareness and funding for injured troops who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. The 16-day journey began in Portland

and ended in San Diego. The riders made stops at VA medical centers along the way, including both the San Francisco and Palo Alto VA Medical Centers.

While at SFFVAMC, Scalia and injured veteran J.R. Martinez met with patients on an inpatient unit, thanking them for their service to our country. SFFVAMC leadership and staff



were on hand during the early Sunday morning visit to welcome the riders and thank them for their efforts on behalf of the VA and veterans. ■

northern california

## New Facilities Opening at VANCHCS

You may have noticed that the Sacramento VA Medical Center at VA Northern California Health Care System has been undergoing major construction projects during the past few years. Now some of the projects are completed or are nearing completion, which will greatly enhance our veterans' experience the next time they visit.

A new Outpatient Specialty Care Building, located by our

Canteen, has opened. The two-story building will offer specialty care in the areas of Neurology, Nephrology, Pulmonary, EMG, GI Liver/Hepatology, Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, ENT and Cardiology. In addition, an Outpatient Mental Health Building located right next door is scheduled to open in January 2008. At that time, Mental Health Services will move from their current location onto hospital property, providing easier access for patients who have multiple, same day appointments.

Furthermore, the lobby renovation of Building 650, the original Mather Air Force Base Hospital, is complete. There are now two large lobbies at the entrance to the Medical Center, providing easy access for patients entering either the main hospital or Building 650. All these projects, and the addition of more than 40 new parking spaces close to the hospital, will provide improved access to our campus and allow us to keep pace with our state of the art care. ■

pacific islands

## Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Convenes in Hawaii

U.S. Senator Daniel K. Akaka (D., Hawaii), Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, recently held three formal committee hearings and four town hall meetings to discuss and learn more about VA health care in Hawaii and the Pacific region. The formal hearings were held on Oahu, Maui and Kona., and the town hall meetings on Lanai, Molokai, Hilo and Kauai.

Among those testifying at the hearings were: Dr. Michael Kussman, VA

Under Secretary for Health; William Tuerk, VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs; Ronald R. Aument, Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits; Dr. Robert L. Wiebe, Director, VA Sierra Pacific Network; Dr. James Hastings, Director, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System, other officials, and veterans.

Also testifying were Gregg Reed, VA Regional Director; Mark Moses, Director for the State Office of Veterans Services; MG Robert Lee, State Adjutant General; BG Gary M. Ishikawa, Hawaii Deputy Adjutant General; Colonel Gerald



Gibbons, Chief of Staff, 9th Regional Readiness Command; and Colonel Arthur Wallace, Acting Commanding General, Tripler Army Medical Center.

All the sessions were very well received and provided an excellent venue for veterans to express their needs and concerns to the Senate Committee and VA officials. ■

## New Teleradiology Center Coming to Palo Alto

The VA Palo Alto Health Care System will soon be the first site and home base for a national system of VA teleradiology that will provide remote interpretation of radiology studies for VA hospitals throughout the country. Another teleradiology center will be located in Puerto Rico. The time zone difference and hours of operation between the two centers will provide service on a 24/7 basis. Based on projected workload, the center will employ a minimum of 10 radiologists.

Teleradiology is the electronic transmission of radiology images for interpretation or consultation at another location. Teleradiology is particularly well suited to the VA and may include the following benefits:

- Allow smaller VA facilities to send images to be read at a central location.
- Assist VA facilities that cannot recruit radiologists.
- Reduce inefficient radiology staffing at low volume facilities.
- Allow interpretation of studies in off-hours and night coverage.

- Improve turnaround time for reports.
- Permit cross coverage with other federal agencies.
- Allow images to be sent to another facility for expert specialist consultation.
- Promote use of a common information structure encompassing all VA facilities.

Most important, the new center will increase productivity, and address one of the most pressing problems in radiology, namely, a national shortage of radiologists. ■

## Seasonal Flu Shots Offered in Unique Setting

VA Central California Health Care System expects to administer flu shots to 10,000 veterans during the 2007-2008 influenza season. This number continues to increase and for this year's flu campaign, VA staff needed to find a larger space than was available indoors.

The unique solution to this challenge was to erect a new outdoor shelter on the front lawn



of the Medical Center. From there, nurses and volunteers are able to efficiently administer vaccine to thousands of veterans, without the high traffic into the outpatient clinic spaces.

In 2006, all VA facilities in Network 21 were provided with a

“Western Shelter,” to assist with Disaster Surge Preparedness – specifically Pandemic Flu. Each 19' x 35' shelter is constructed of waterproof fabric, hard rollout flooring, and includes lighting, heating and air conditioning, plus a toilet and sink vestibule.

Sean Hinds, Emergency Management Specialist, said, “It was a great opportunity to practice raising the Shelter to prepare for a true emergency and to add a new dimension for veterans in the 2007 Flu Clinic.” ■

## VASNHCS's Bowling Team: Battle Born Blind Veterans

Patty Beck-Weaver, a visual impairment coordinator, has come on board here at VASNHCS to help visually impaired veterans. But her mission goes beyond that. She noticed a common thread among visually impaired veterans: “... sadness, despair and isolation – even from their families,” she said.

Patty's main duties are to obtain low-vision aids,

and to train veterans how to use the devices, but she felt she needed to come up with something else that would better help her clients. She discovered a tool that worked: a bowling team.

The team first played in May 2006 at the Veterans Affairs' National Golden Age Games in Hampton, Virginia. Thereafter, the group, consisting of 20 members who are considered legally blind, took the name Battle Born Blind Veterans. Also

known as the High Rollers, they began to meet Tuesday mornings on a regular basis.

Patty's goal of providing an outlet for visually impaired veterans is helped immeasurably by the support of the VA Medical Center and its staff. “They really help these veterans be as successful as they want to be,” she said. “I'm blessed, because I have an opportunity to help them overcome obstacles they think are hopeless.” ■

# A Laughing Matter: The Diesel Fitter

**M**arty had recently retired after 26 years of military service and had taken a job in what seemed an unlikely place for a battle-scarred veteran - a women's lingerie factory.

Amazed at his choice of jobs, one of his old buddies asked him, "What

in the world are you doing in a lingerie factory?"

Marty's reply: "I'm a diesel fitter."

Puzzled by what seemed to be an unlikely connection between diesel engines and lingerie, his buddy asked Marty to describe in more detail exactly what his job entailed.

"That's easy," said Marty.

"All day long, I stand at the end of the line where the women's panties are made. As they get to me, I hold up each pair and if they're made properly, I just announce, "Yeh, dees' fit 'er." ■

## WORD SEARCH

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 P E S O R H P V X H Q R B R S N N G Z Z E R C  
 Q E U I L B H K S B N F E C U U C I P N I O H  
 A V R P V O E E A U A O I A W V N H O M G K F  
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 T Q E Z L O T I R I O C D S E M T C V M R W S  
 W F I Y E E T E Z I N X O C S U E X R R Q P T  
 J J L X R X U E B E I I T C A I E N S X O R A  
 P P L I C S R I C J D I T C O V M N T J F S C  
 N O A W S B T M Y T O X E I U L R S E I R M V  
 E L N G E N Y X W N I R O A A V Y U N I I H V  
 S D C N A G Y V H T P O Z J G T G H K A G M W  
 W N E W V Z C U Z D Z E N W U L I X P O R Y H  
 W X I D W D S E U F Q G M E E A I V W A Y T H  
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 F Y Q M M R H Y P E V I T C E F F E R U P S H  
 R G W I J G N I N E E R C S E O Q W Y B K R X

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AUREUS

ANTIBIOTICS

INFECTION

HYGIENE

PRECAUTION

TREATMENT

BACTERIA

COLONIZED

PROTECTION

SCREENING

INITIATIVE

SURVEILLANCE

EFFECTIVE

REDUCTION

TRANSMISSION

# Protect Yourself with a Yearly Flu Shot

**T**he influenza (or flu) season, which begins in autumn, and continues through early spring, has arrived again. The good news is that the flu is highly preventable with a yearly flu vaccine. Vaccinations are available daily for enrolled veterans at our walk-in clinics.

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus, and can have serious and life-threatening complications. Last year, more than 200,000 people were hospitalized in the United States, and more than 36,000 people died, making it the sixth leading cause of death in adults. It should not be confused with the “stomach flu,” which is a catchall name for stomach upset caused by other microorganisms.

Unfortunately, too many people ignore the threat, their favorite excuses being either, “I got a shot last year,” or, “If I get the shot, I’m afraid I’ll get the flu.”

Neither excuse is valid. Flu viruses change from year to year, so prior years’ flu shots afford no protection whatever. And, because the flu vaccine is an inactivated (or “killed”) virus, it’s impossible to get the flu from that vaccine.

The risk is simply too great to ignore. A bout of influenza

will generally mean, at best, a two-to-six-week period of high fever, extreme tiredness, and various aches and pains. For older persons, and for those with heart, lungs, asthma, diabetes, muscle or nerve disorders, or kidney diseases, the danger is even greater. Also, people who have blood problems or a weakened immune system need to be vaccinated every year.

A recent article in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* cites an extensive study, which found that an increased use of flu shots by elderly people at high risk of complications would prevent thousands of deaths and hospital visits annually.

Study author Kristin L. Nichol, M.D., chief of medicine at the Veterans

Administration Medical Center in Minneapolis, said flu shots are more cost-effective and could save more lives among people 65 and older than screenings for cancer, heart disease and blood disorders.

This year, the VA recommends that anyone 50 years of age or older should get a flu shot. Not only is the flu vaccine recommended for patients, but VA has set a goal of vaccinating at least 60 percent of all health-care providers. ■



## The Flu Q & A

### How does the flu spread?

It spreads when infected people cough or sneeze, or by touching something with the virus on it, and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes.

### What are the symptoms?

They include: fever, headache, cough, sore throat, body aches, runny nose, nausea, tiredness, vomiting and diarrhea.

### How does the vaccine work?

The virus changes from year to year, so the vaccine is annually updated to include the current strain. It takes about two to four weeks to develop immunity. The vaccine can prevent illness by 70 to 90 percent.

### Who should be vaccinated?

- Adults aged 50 years and older;
- Anyone with chronic medical conditions or an immune deficiency;
- Residents of nursing homes or long-term care facilities;
- People who can transmit flu to others at high risk for complications;
- Pregnant women;
- Children aged 6-59 months.

If you have an allergy to eggs, or have previously had a severe reaction to the vaccine, don’t get the flu shot. If you have questions, ask your doctor or nurse.

### How can I help prevent the flu?

- Place a tissue over your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze (or use your sleeve if you don’t have a tissue);
- Frequently wash your hands with soap and water, or use a gel hand sanitizer;
- Avoid close contact with others when sick;
- Avoid touching your mouth, nose or eyes, because germs can enter your system this way. ■

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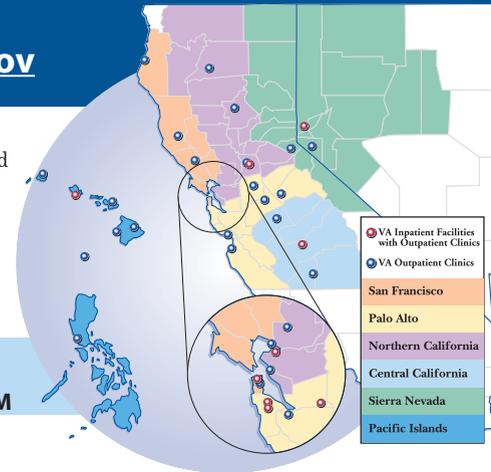
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