

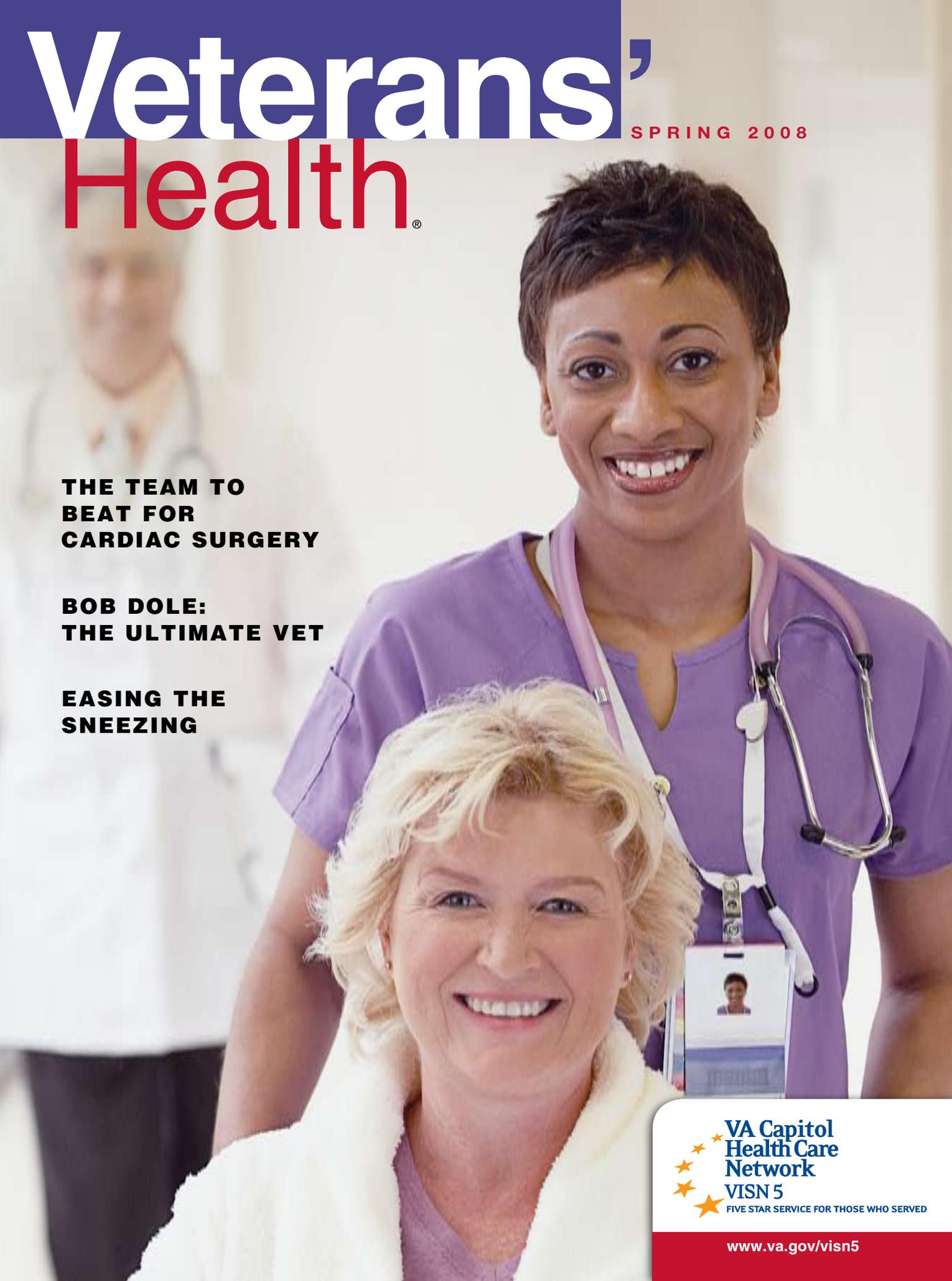
# Veterans' Health®

SPRING 2008

**THE TEAM TO  
BEAT FOR  
CARDIAC SURGERY**

**BOB DOLE:  
THE ULTIMATE VET**

**EASING THE  
SNEEZING**



**VA Capitol  
Health Care  
Network**  
VISN 5  
FIVE STAR SERVICE FOR THOSE WHO SERVED

[www.va.gov/visn5](http://www.va.gov/visn5)

# We're passionate about your health!

**A**t VISN 5, there's nothing more important to us than providing the best health care available. It's our goal and our passion. I'm glad to say that in many ways, VISN 5 and the entire VA health care system is achieving that goal.

In his recent book, "Best Care Anywhere," author Phillip Longman writes: "A solution to America's health care crisis does exist, I realized. Better than that, you don't have to rely on mere theoretical speculations or econometric simulations to see how it might work, nor do you have to wait around for a revolution in technology. You don't even have to travel to some far-off foreign country like Sweden, or even Canada, to see it in operation."

Longman is describing our very own VA health care system. He goes on to discuss VA's "exceptional safety record, use of evidence-based medicine, its health promotion and wellness programs, and its unparalleled adoption of electronic medical records and other information technologies."

I'm very proud of the VA health care system, and especially VISN 5. The more I get around our VISN, the prouder I become. The best news for all the veterans reading *Veterans' Health* is that we're not resting on our laurels. We continue to work every day to make our system even better.

Thanks to all the veterans who honor us by using the VISN 5 health care system.

Regards,

*Sanford M. Garfunkel*

Sanford M. Garfunkel, FACHE

Director, VA Capitol Health Care Network, VISN 5



▲ Former U.S. Sen. Bob Dole spoke at VA headquarters in Washington, D.C. Read the story on page 6.

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

### 3 VA NEWS

### 4 DCVAMC: The team to beat for cardiac surgery

### 6 PROFILE OF A PROUD VET Bob Dole shares his war stories

### 8 VA MARYLAND: Taking aim at super germs — Nursing home gets new space — Around-the-clock medical advice

### 10 MARTINSBURG VA: How to survive pollen season

### 12 Contact VISN 5



# VA spending \$5 million more to train psychologists

**VA** is adding \$5.3 million a year to its budget to expand training programs for psychologists in order to provide more mental health services for veterans returning from recent combat.

Although more than 800 psychologists have been hired in the last three years, VA anticipates employing even more mental health specialists to meet the increasing demand.

“By expanding our budget and training programs for psychologists within VA, we will be

able to make enhancements to the world-class mental health services we already provide,” says VA Secretary James B. Peake, M.D. “This initiative will not only meet our short-

**“We will be able to make enhancements to the world-class mental health services we already provide.”**

—VA Secretary James B. Peake, M.D.

term hiring needs but also guarantee that VA has a pool of well-trained psychologists in the future.”

The best resource for VA recruitment of psychologists has been VA’s own training programs, so the number of psychologists receiving VA training will increase each year, beginning with the



VA Secretary  
James B. Peake, M.D.

2008-2009 academic year. The funding will provide for 61 internship and 98 post-doctoral fellowship positions, bringing the number of psychology training positions nationwide to 620 per year. 🌟

## Suicide prevention leader gets Secretary’s Award

**T**he national coordinator for VA’s recently established National Suicide Prevention Hotline has received the VA Secretary’s Award for Exceptional Service.

Janet Kemp, R.N., Ph.D., was cited recently by VA Secretary James B. Peake, M.D., in recognition of her role in setting up the hotline and for her 20 years of experience working with veterans as a mental health professional.

“Janet Kemp’s leadership in VA’s Suicide Prevention Program has had an immediate impact on

helping save the lives of veterans who were contemplating suicide,” Dr. Peake says. “This award is a reflection of her commitment throughout her VA career to counsel and educate veterans



about mental health issues.”

The hotline, based in Canandaigua, N.Y., began operating in late July. It provides professional counseling 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to veterans and their family members or friends. So far, the hotline has received more than 19,000 calls and has referred 1,453 veterans nationwide for additional counseling. More than 350 veterans who were considering suicide have been rescued because of the service. 🌟

### ➔ Call first

If you need help, call the Suicide Prevention Hotline at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**.



## The team to beat

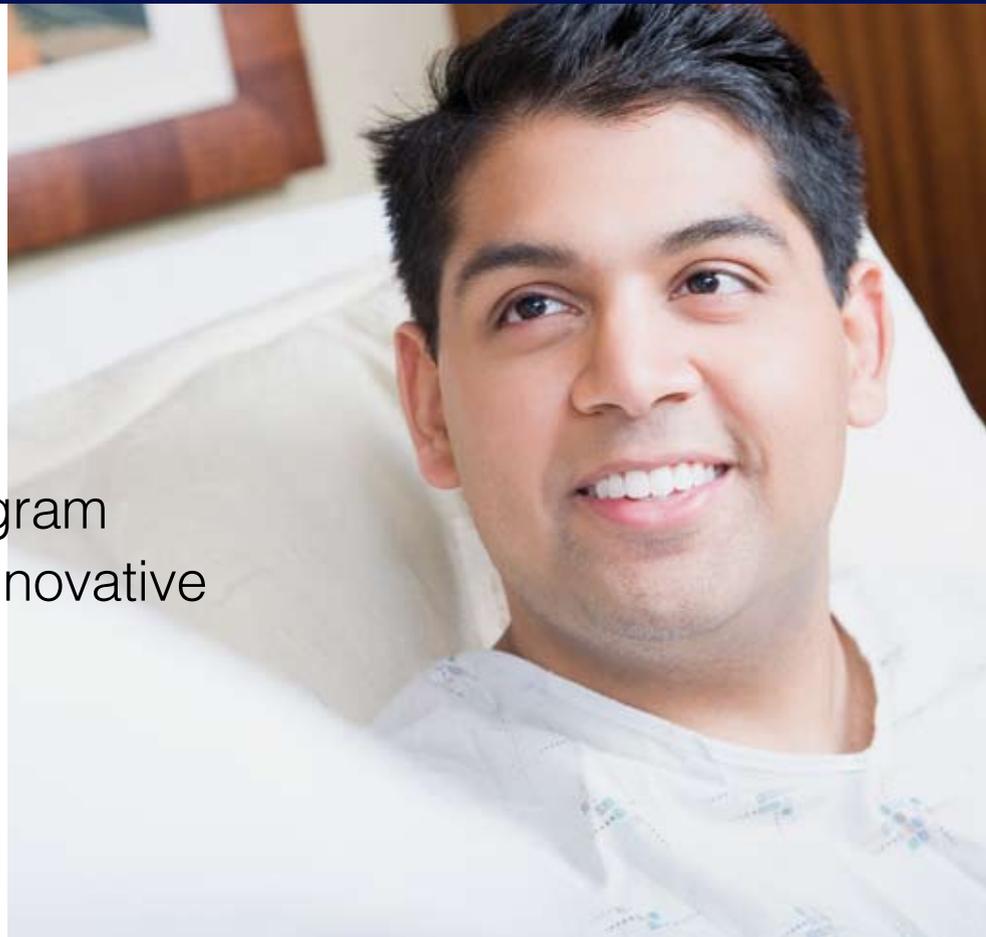
Heart surgery program among the most innovative

If you're a veteran in need of heart surgery, you'll be in capable hands with the Washington DC VA Medical Center (DCVAMC) cardiothoracic surgery team. Over the last three years, DCVAMC has emerged as a leader in cardiothoracic surgery in the region, and referrals are steadily increasing.

### Comprehensive services

The DCVAMC cardiothoracic surgery team offers a full range of cardiac surgical services. Coronary artery bypass graft (known as CABG), valve surgery, aortic root reconstruction, and aneurysm and arrhythmia surgeries are among the procedures performed.

Since 2001, the team has performed 70 percent of the beating heart procedures—the highest percentage—in the Washington, D.C. area. The surgical team is a model of excellence in areas such as atrial fibrillation using radio-frequency bipolar ablation techniques, a less-invasive surgical method for treating arrhythmia, and high-risk surgical revascularization, a complex treatment of



coronary artery disease associated with abnormal heart muscle function.

The cardiothoracic surgery team has also expanded its services to heart failure patients by refining valve repair and reconstruction techniques, and performing mini-circuit cardiopulmonary bypass since 2004. In fact, DCVAMC's cardiac program is the only one in the area to use this technology.

### Among the best outcomes

DCVAMC, the cardiac referral center for VISN 5, has a proud history of performing cardiac surgery, dating from the early 1960s. The cardiothoracic surgery program saw dramatic improvements in the early 1990s under the leadership of the chief of cardiology,

Ross D. Fletcher, M.D., who is currently chief of staff, and Benjamin Aaron, M.D.

Today, cardiac surgeon Gregory Trachiotis, M.D., leads the DCVAMC cardiothoracic surgical team under the direction of internationally recognized surgeon Anton Sidawy, M.D., chief of surgery. Cardiothoracic surgeon Pendleton Alexander, M.D., helps create a culture of quality patient care. The team also consists of three physician assistants, two perfusionists, three dedicated cardiovascular OR nurses, two dedicated cardiac anesthesiologists and six to eight dedicated cardiac ICU nurses.

The team has been effective in bringing state-of-the-art technology and equipment to their treatment of complex cardiac diseases.



# HIGHLIGHTS

► Members of the DCVAMC cardiothoracic surgery team.  
▼ A cardiac patient undergoes surgery at DCVAMC.



Their outcomes are among the best in VA and compare favorably to—or are even better than—the private sector.

By encouraging creativity and independent career growth, in combination with team building and support, DCVAMC has attracted and retained some of the most highly skilled physicians and other health care workers in the nation to its cardiac program.

## A focus on research

The cardiothoracic surgery program is actively involved in clinical research. For example, it participated in the VA Cooperative Study Program's assessment of coronary bypass grafting using

a heart-lung machine on an arrested heart (on-pump) versus procedures performed on a beating heart (off-pump).

DCVAMC also participated in the Rheos feasibility trial, which studied an implantation device designed to lower blood pressure by stimulating the body's natural blood pressure regulators. Dr. Trachiotis was on the team that published the outcomes of using the device, which showed a significant reduction in refractory hypertension.

## Using the latest technology

VA's electronic health record (EHR) system is an exceptional tool for providing excellence in

surgical practice. EHRs ensure accuracy in identifying patients, screening and tracking their illnesses, reviewing local or distant facility data and coordinating care with all providers. Moreover, through the use of EHRs, clinicians can ensure that patients are being treated with the proper medication and doses. EHRs are one factor in DCVAMC's success in helping patients reduce their cardiac disease risk factors.

The cardiothoracic surgical team is currently working on expanding the medical center's heart failure program to include mechanical assist device therapy, which supports the function of the heart. The team is also developing a hybrid operating room suite for minimally invasive procedures. The operating room will have full connection to the EHR system, cameras and video conferencing equipment—all intended to enhance training and education for students, residents and colleagues and to offer better and safer care to veterans.

Members of the DCVAMC surgical service and the cardiothoracic surgery team have a passion for their profession, for their fellow team members and for providing excellent health care to our nation's veterans. Veterans and their families can be assured that this highly skilled group will continue to provide quality care using state-of-the-art equipment and technological support. ★

## → Help for your heart

For more information about the cardiac surgery program at DCVAMC, call (202) 745-8626.



# Bob Dole: Proud to be a veteran



In his best-selling book, “One Soldier’s Story,” former U.S. Sen. Bob Dole recounts the serious injuries he sustained while serving in the Army in World War II and the care he received from several Army hospitals, with help from VA, which helped him recover.

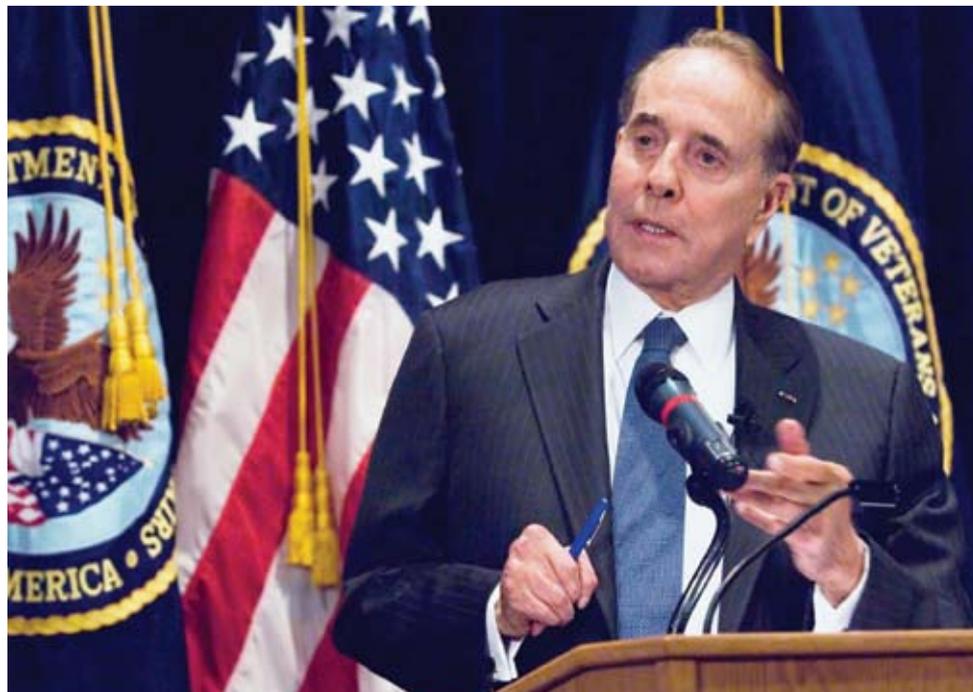
Dole’s memoir is a tribute to those who served in the military in World War II and to the health care professionals, family members and friends who helped in his long recovery. In a Jan. 29 speech at VA headquarters in Washington, D.C., Dole, 84, shared his memories, laced with humor, and anecdotes about life lessons he learned along the way.

His experiences after the war parallel the development and growth of VA in its early days of caring for World War II veterans.

“His story tells the tale of what this great department is all about,” VA Secretary James B. Peake, M.D., said when introducing Dole. “It’s woven with the special thread of the brotherhood of arms, the relationships that endure from the battlefield to the hospital rooms.”

## Giving credit to others

In his book, Dole also describes growing up in a close-knit family in Russell, Kan., where he acquired the strength of character that served him well through his experiences as a lieutenant in the 10th Mountain Division.



▲ Sen. Bob Dole shares his experiences with veterans.

◀ Dole with VA Secretary James B. Peake (right) and Gordon H. Mansfield, deputy VA secretary.

Dole’s gripping account of his wounding in Italy gives full credit to his platoon mates for saving his life when a German shell blast shattered his shoulder and damaged his spinal cord, rendering him paralyzed from the neck down.

Although he was twice decorated for achievement and

received two Purple Hearts and two Bronze Star medals, Dole doesn’t think of himself as a hero.

“There are a lot of heroes in this room,” Dole said. “I’m not one of them. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, two weeks before World War II ended.”

Dole’s recovery began with a brief stay at an Army field hospital in Italy before being transferred to the Winter General Army Hospital in Topeka, Kan., now the Colmery-O’Neil VA Medical Center, one of the first



Army hospitals to be taken over by VA after the war.

Through three years of treatment, surgeries and rehabilitation at several military hospitals, Dole said there were times when he thought he might die or never again have use of his arms or legs. He credited Hampar Kelikian, M.D., a nationally renowned Chicago orthopedic surgeon who performed several operations on him at no cost, with helping Dole change his attitude, accept his limitations and make the best of what he had.

### Grateful for good care

Dole described a special memento he kept on his Senate desk throughout his career—a

cigar box from the counter of a drugstore in Russell where he once worked. Attached to the box was a simple, hand-lettered sign, “For Bob Dole.” It had contained \$1,800 collected from people in his hometown, which helped him to defray hospitalization costs.

Recently, Dole served as co-chair of the President’s Commission on Care for America’s Returning Wounded Warriors, which recommended ways to improve care for U.S. service members and veterans. He emphasized that his role in developing the commission’s recommendations was shaped by the gratitude he has for the care he received—the same

quality care provided to others today by people working for VA.

“I feel very strongly—as everybody does—about veterans getting the best possible care available,” Dole said.

He continued with words of praise for the work of VA staff, noting that he’s been associated with Army medical facilities and VA for most of his adult life.

“I’ve read all the stories. I know that sometimes mistakes happen, and that percentage is very small, but things do happen,” Dole said. “And we have to correct them. But overall, I’m trying to get somebody to write the story about the greatest, largest health care group in the world. It’s right here.”

Dole recovered from his wounds well enough to attend law school on the GI bill, after which he launched a distinguished public service career as a congressman, U.S. senator and the Republican Party’s presidential nominee in 1996. He served as chairman of the National World War II Memorial and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian award.

Despite all the honors, Dole said he wants to be remembered in a more special way.

“I’ve been asked many times what I want to have on my tombstone when I depart this world,” said Dole. “I reply with one word—veteran.” ★

## Picking a fight

### Hospitals are aggressively battling infections

“**S**uper” germs, which live on people and the things they touch, are all around us—at home, in the community and in hospitals. These germs can cause infections that are difficult to treat because they don’t respond to common antibiotics. One “super” germ that can make a person extremely ill is methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA.

MRSA can spread from person to person as easily as the common cold and can live on the skin or any surface for several days or even weeks. The most effective way to prevent a MRSA infection is by washing your hands with soap and water or a hand-sanitizing gel.

“MRSA is now common in the community, where it mostly causes boils or abscesses,” says Mary Claire Roghman, M.D., an epidemiologist with the VA Maryland Health Care System. “Although these community infections often aren’t serious, this makes our job harder because more veterans test positive for MRSA when they’re admitted. These patients can transmit MRSA to others in the hospital.”

Dr. Roghman adds that MRSA infections can be life-threatening to patients in hospitals, where transmission takes place primarily through health care workers’ hands and environmental contamination.



Rusty Silk, health care technician at the Baltimore VA Medical Center, disinfects his hands when he goes from one patient’s room to another.

The VA Maryland Health Care System has measures in place to eliminate the spread of MRSA in each of our facilities. All patients are tested upon admission for MRSA infection, and MRSA-positive patients are placed in private rooms or with other patients who have the same germ. Signs are posted outside the patient’s room to remind every person going in and out of the room to take the necessary precautions.

VA staff members are also now teaching patients how to stop the spread of MRSA. At

the same time, VA health care staff members are washing their hands before and after caring for all patients, and they’re wearing gloves and gowns when caring for MRSA-positive patients. ★

#### ➔ Stop the spread

For more information about MRSA and how to prevent MRSA infection, contact Kathy Agnes, R.N., infection control coordinator for the VA Maryland Health Care System, at **1-800-463-6295, ext. 7471.**

## On the move at Perry Point

By Margaret Hornberger, Community Resources Development Specialist

**N**ursing home patients at the Perry Point VA Medical Center now have spacious living areas and more privacy since relocating to a newly renovated building on the medical center's campus.

The aging infrastructure of the former facility created a need for a replacement, so a vacant patient care building was converted into a 55-bed nursing home, which opened recently. It will be used until construction begins on a new state-of-the-art facility—a project awaiting federal funding.

Features of the renovated building include upgraded heating and air-conditioning systems and enhanced safety and security.

In addition to numerous structural improvements, the

facility provides a patient-friendly environment, complete with bright colors and plenty of natural light throughout the interior.

And thanks to a former patient, everyone in the new facility has his or her own flat-screen television. John Feeley, Jr., formerly of Colora, Md., bequeathed his entire estate to the Perry Point VA Medical Center following his death. His generous contribution was used to purchase the TVs to benefit patients. ★

---

Perry Point VA Medical Center employees Mary Grant (left), clinical nurse specialist, and Deloris Baggett, nursing assistant, greet Korean War veteran Daniel Ceconato during the recent nursing home move.



## Medical advice now available 24/7

**D**o you have questions about your medications or need other medical advice? Now there's a service available any time of the day or night to help you. In January, the Telephone Care Line for the VA Maryland Health Care System began operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Around-the-clock medical advice is available to Maryland's veterans because

of a new contract with the Bronx VA Medical Center. Previously, the care line was available weekdays only from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Hours were increased to better serve veterans' needs. ★

### → Feeling ill?

Contact the Telephone Care Line at **1-800-865-2441**.

# Easing the sneezing

How to survive pollen season

## Hay fever signs and symptoms

**Y**our risk of developing allergies is 48 percent if one parent has an allergic condition, but 70 percent if both parents have allergies. Some hay fever symptoms are more obvious than others:

- a runny or stuffy nose
- red, swollen, itchy or watery eyes
- repeated and prolonged sneezing
- an itchy throat or roof of the mouth
- itchy ears
- allergic shiners (swollen, bluish skin under the eyes)
- postnasal drip and cough
- sleeplessness, fatigue and irritability
- facial pressure and pain

**M**any poems have been written about the beauty of springtime, but it's a good bet the poets weren't allergy sufferers. Pollen released by trees, grasses or weeds can trigger annoying and unpleasant symptoms, making life a challenge until allergy season passes.

Short of living in a bubble or moving to a different part of the country, you can't avoid pollen—but you don't have to suffer. Follow these precautions to avoid getting sidelined by allergies:

- **Watch the pollen count.** Pollen counts are usually higher in the morning and on warm, dry, breezy days, and they're at their lowest when it's chilly and wet. Check online or tune in to your local radio or TV weather report for your area's pollen count so you can plan your day. If you enjoy walking, you may want to walk in the evening when it's more comfortable. And if the pollen count is high, put off gardening or mowing the grass until levels are lower. Use a dust mask if outdoor activity is unavoidable.
- **Turn on the air.** Shut the





## Are allergy shots right for you?

**A**llergy shots, or immunotherapy, can desensitize you to specific allergens and reduce or eliminate the need for medications. An allergist injects small amounts of allergens (the substances to which you react) once or twice a week for three to six months and then monthly for three to five years. You may be a candidate for allergy shots if:

- medication doesn't ease your allergy symptoms
- you aren't able to take allergy medications without side effects
- your allergies trigger asthma
- your symptoms are severe and cause your quality of life to suffer
- you face a lengthy allergy season
- avoiding allergens isn't possible

Tell your doctor if you are pregnant or take beta-blockers, since allergy shots can cause serious complications.

windows and use air conditioning at home and in the car. Consider buying an air-purifying device for your bedroom to help you sleep more soundly.

- **Try over-the-counter (OTC) medications.** OTC antihistamines can relieve itching and sneezing but some may cause drowsiness. OTC decongestants reduce nasal congestion and dry up excess mucus but may cause jitteriness or sleeplessness. Read product labels for side effects.

- **Consider prescription options.** If OTC drugs don't

### → Get relief

**F**or help with allergies, contact your primary care provider or call the Martinsburg VAMC Medical Advice Line at **1-800-817-3807**.

help, talk to your doctor about prescription drugs. Some medications are available by prescription only; others are different formulations of OTC drugs. Your doctor may also prescribe anti-inflammatory drugs like corticosteroids or

bronchodilators if you begin to suffer asthma symptoms. If you've suffered from repeated hay fever attacks in the past, your doctor can help you avoid developing a more serious problem such as chronic sinusitis or nasal polyps. ★



# VA Capitol Health Care Network Veterans Integrated Service Network 5 (VISN 5)

## Important Telephone Numbers

### VA Maryland Health Care System

**Baltimore VAMC**  
1-800-463-6295

**VAMHCS Medical Advice Line**  
1-800-865-2441

**Perry Point VAMC**  
1-800-949-1003

**Automated Prescription Refill and  
Clinic Appointment System**  
1-800-463-6295, ext. 7395

**Baltimore VA Rehabilitation  
& Extended Care Center**  
1-800-463-6295

### Martinsburg VA Medical Center

**Martinsburg VAMC**  
(304) 263-0811

**Medical Advice Line**  
1-800-817-3807 or (304) 262-4855

**Patient Eligibility**  
(304) 263-0811, ext. 3758/3757  
Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.– 4:30 p.m.  
or ext. 3050 after 4:30 p.m.

**Automated Prescription Refill System**  
(304) 263-0811, ext. 4870 (all hours)

**Outreach Coordinator**  
(301) 665-1462

### Washington DC VA Medical Center

**General Information**  
(202) 745-8000

**Patient Service Center and  
Medical Advice Line**  
(202) 745-8577

**VETS Information**  
(202) 745-4046

**PTSD Clinic Number**  
(202) 745-8591

**For Toll-Free Service**  
1-877-DCVAMC1

### Outpatient Clinics

**Cambridge, MD**  
(410) 228-6243

**Charlotte Hall, MD**  
(301) 884-7102

**Cumberland, MD**  
1-866-712-8084

**Fort Howard, MD**  
(410) 477-1800

**Glen Burnie, MD**  
(410) 590-4140

**Greenbelt, MD**  
(301) 345-2463

**Hagerstown, MD**  
1-866-399-0117

**Loch Raven, MD**  
(410) 957-7651

**Pocomoke City, MD**  
(410) 957-6718

**Alexandria, VA**  
(703) 313-0694

**Harrisonburg, VA**  
(540) 442-1773

**Stephens City, VA**  
1-866-463-8532

**Franklin, WV**  
(304) 358-2355

**Petersburg, WV**  
(304) 257-5817

**Washington, DC**  
(202) 745-8685

### Vet Centers

**Baltimore, MD**  
(410) 764-9400

**Cambridge, MD**  
(410) 228-6305, ext. 4123

**Elkton, MD**  
(410) 392-4485

**Silver Spring, MD**  
(301) 589-1073

**Washington, DC**  
(202) 543-8821

**Martinsburg, WV**  
(304) 263-6776

**Alexandria, VA**  
(703) 360-1442

### Veterans Benefit Administration

**1-800-827-1000**

### Education Information Hotline

**1-800-442-4551**

Visit us on our website at [www.va.gov/visn5](http://www.va.gov/visn5)

### Veterans' Health

Department of Veterans Affairs  
849 International Drive  
Suite 275  
Linthicum, MD 21090

PRSRT STD  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
LEBANON JUNCTION, KY  
PERMIT NO. 19