

**Department of Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans
Residence Inn by Marriott, 1199 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C.
Public Meeting September 24 - 25, 2008**

September 24, 2008

Present:

The Honorable Charlie Cragin, Committee Chair

Committee Members (alphabetical order):

Martha Douthit

Dr. Henry Falk

Mark Garner

Dr. Lynn Goldman

Dr. John Hart

Rusty Jones

Kirt Love

Dan Pinedo

LTG (USAR, RET) Tom Plewes

Valerie Randall

Randy Reese

Steve Robertson

Not Present:

Dan Ortiz

Opening Remarks by the Honorable Charlie Cragin

Mr. Cragin welcomed the Committee members and members of the public as well as those that phoned in through the teleconference. He expressed that the agenda for the two day meeting would be very full consisting of presentations from Veterans Health Administration on September 24th and Veterans Benefits Administration on September 25th.

Gulf War Registry & Outreach

Mark Brown, PhD

Director, Environmental Agents Service, Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards

Dr. Brown, accompanied by Mr. Steven Sloane, Deputy Director of Environmental Agents Service, and Ms. Helen Malaskiewicz, Senior Environmental Health Coordinator, gave the history of VA's Gulf War outreach activities and current programs for Gulf War veterans. He discussed various aspects of the Gulf War Registry to include a recent addition to the Registry exam, the Special Depleted Uranium (DU) Surveillance Program. The DU Program is operated out of the VA Medical Center in Baltimore, MD and run by Dr. Melissa McDiarmid. In addition, Dr. Brown talked about the Congressional authority granted to VA in 1994 to provide clinical exams to Gulf War family members which was limited in that it only authorized VA to give clinical examinations to family members but did not allow for their treatment. VA does not have legal authority to provide care to non-veterans. The program authorization lapsed in December 31, 2003 which ended the program.

Dr. Brown's prepared comments are attached.

Health Care Priority Groups

Tony A. Guagliardo

Director, Business Policy, Veterans Health Administration

Mr. Guagliardo presented an overview of VHA Health Care Benefits eligibility and specifically addressed each of the priority health care groups. He also explained the restrictions on Priority Group 8 enrollments for veterans applying on or after January 17, 2003.

Mr. Guagliardo's presentation is attached.

Clinical Care Panel Discussion

Craig Hyams, MD, MPH

Chief Consultant for Environmental Health, Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards

Joe Francis, MD, MPH

Deputy Chief Quality and Performance Officer

Stephen Hunt, MD, MPH

Director, Deployment Health Clinic, VA Puget Sound & Director, National Post-Deployment Integrated Care

The Clinical Care Panel explained the relationship between clinical care and VA's clinical practice guidelines and how the Secretary of VA uses the Institute of Medicine's Gulf War research in establishing compensable presumptions.

Dr. Hyams began by expounding on Public Laws 105-277 and 105-368 which directed Veterans Affairs to ask the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to evaluate the scientific literature regarding associations between illness and exposures to potential health hazards related to Gulf War service. He also highlighted recent IOM Gulf War Studies as well as their recent findings.

Dr. Hyams' presentation is attached.

Dr. Francis presented an overview of Veterans Affairs' use of clinical practice guidelines also known as evidence based practices. He used as an example VA's *Guideline for Medically Unexplained Symptoms: Chronic Pain and Fatigue*. Currently, algorithms can be pulled up in the online guidelines. The goal is to have the guidelines in the electronic health record when the diagnosis is made or when the demographics indicate the patient is a Gulf War veteran. The plan is to also have electronic decision support at the point of care. Dr. Francis emphasized that the guidelines are not cookbooks for physicians but rather are drivers of clinical policy.

Dr. Francis' presentation is attached.

Dr. Stephen Hunt, one of the authors of the *Guideline for Medically Unexplained Symptoms*, discussed the Puget Sound Integrated Post-Combat Care for returning combat veterans which emerged from his care of veterans returning from the first Gulf War. He conducted approximately 1500 registry exams for this population of veteran and linked those exams to

clinical care. He cared for a large number of those veterans over an extended period of time, some of whom he continues to see. A multi-disciplinary clinic, the Deployment Health Clinic was originally called the Gulf War Veterans Clinic. It is designed to comprehensively care for returning veterans. The Clinic documents exposures and uses an occupational environmental medicine approach for taking care of the veteran. The Puget Sound Integrated Post-Combat Care has become a post-combat care model throughout the Veterans Health Care System.

Dr. Hunt's presentation is attached.

Public Comment Period

Public comments were heard from the following:

- Mr. Michael Roley, accompanied by his son Midshipman Christopher Roley, from Louisville, Kentucky.
- Mr. Christopher Launier from the Tampa Florida area.
- Mr. David Keith Winnett, Jr., retired Marine Corps Captain, from Torrance, California.

The afternoon was conducted in closed session at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. The meeting was closed to protect the privacy of the patients and to minimize possible interference with the delivery of medical services at the VAMC. In addition to receiving a presentation from Dr. Patricia Hayes on Women's Health care, the Committee met with clinicians to discuss the delivery of health care. Also while at the Washington DC VA Medical Center, the Committee conversed with a panel of five Gulf War veterans who expressed their concerns and recommendations about the delivery of health care and benefits.

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Not Present:

Dr. Lynn Goldman

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Opening Remarks by the Honorable Charlie Cragin

Mr. Cragin welcomed the Committee and the members of the public to the meeting including those that called in using the teleconference line. He explained that as requested by the Advisory Committee, the Veterans Benefits Administration would be addressing specific benefits and compensation issues.

Disability Compensation System Overview

Keith Stabler

Chief, Judicial and Advisory Review Staff, Compensation and Pension Service

Mr. Stabler gave an overview of VA's Disability Compensation System. He explained the compensation rating schedule and pension benefits for veterans and eligible surviving family members. Mr. Stabler also discussed different compensation initiatives designed to speed claims processing such as the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program. He also explained the differences between disability determinations made by the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs and the impact upon the veteran.

The Disability Compensation System Overview presentation is attached.

Chronology of VBA Responses to the Gulf War and Gulf War Statute Status

Brad Flohr

Assistant Director, Compensation and Pension Service

Mr. Flohr discussed Gulf War statutes and VBA's actions in response to those statutes as well as VA's reactions to changes in laws resulting from the Gulf War benefits based on service in the Gulf War. He explained how VA collected data based on veterans claims and centrally processed those claims in the Louisville, Kentucky Regional Office. In addition, Mr. Flohr talked about the timeline for service related presumptions for Gulf War veterans. As of February 2008, there are approximately 4700 veterans receiving compensation for undiagnosed illnesses.

Mr. Flohr's presentation is attached.

Undiagnosed Illnesses

Keith Stabler

Chief, Judicial and Advisory Review Staff, Compensation and Pension Service

Mr. Stabler specifically addressed statistics related to undiagnosed illnesses compensation claims. He also explained to the members the governing regulation definition and criterion for undiagnosed illnesses.

The Undiagnosed Illnesses presentation is attached.

VBA Outreach Activities to Gulf War Veterans

Michael MacDonald

VBA Outreach Coordinator

Mr. MacDonald gave an overview of the various VBA outreach programs and the Department of Veterans Affairs' interaction with the Department of Defense and Department of Labor in the execution of some of those programs. He also discussed some of the newer efforts to include the pilot suicide prevention program. For example, VA has placed signage throughout the DC metro system targeting veterans in need of help. Mr. MacDonald announced that VA will be reaching out to the media to help with expanding its outreach activities.

Mr. MacDonald's presentation is attached.

Public Comment Period

Public comments were heard from the following:

- Margaret Hursh from Valdez, Arizona.

- Michael Letterman, U.S. Army veteran from Missouri. After hearing Mr. Letterman's comments, the Chairman asked him to write a chronological statement of events of his case and send it to Ms. Lelia Jackson for the Chairman's attention. The Committee will send his story to Veterans Benefits Administration as a persona of similar veterans to help the members of the Committee track through the disability compensation and service process. This will also help the Committee in gaining a better understanding of the claims process and service delivery which

may ultimately become a part of the Committee's final recommendation to the Secretary.

- Mr. Donald Overton, Army veteran representing Veterans of Modern Warfare.
- Mr. Britt Small, 100% disabled Vietnam Army veteran, and Homeless Veterans Chairman of the Fourth District Veterans Affairs Chairman of The American Legion Department of Missouri.
- Mr. Anthony Hardie, Gulf War veteran from Madison, Wisconsin, and member of the VA Gulf War Research Advisory Committee.
- Denise Nichols, RN Maj USAFR (Ret) Coalition Vice Chairman & Chairman – Gulf War Illness Committee, National Vietnam & Gulf War Veterans Coalition

The Chairman asked the public to continue communications with the Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans. He went on to urge members of the public to submit written statements with the key points of concern, to include the who, what, when, where, and how, so that the Committee can later refer to those comments and also note trends related to benefits and services.

Gulf War Data Issues

LTG Tom Plewes, USAR (Ret), Member, Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans

Mr. Plewes, accompanied by Mr. Dat Tran, Director, Veterans Affairs National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, presented a data matrix of issues related to the Gulf War that would be useful to the Committee in its deliberations. He laid out what data is currently available to the Committee, what the Committee would like to know, and the way ahead in obtaining the data.

The Gulf War Data Issues presentation is attached.

Committee Discussion and Deliberations

The Committee discussed how the Committee should proceed geographically and programmatically. The Committee talked about various survey mechanisms like conducting a National survey or having focus groups obtain data from Gulf War veterans regarding benefits and services. The members also discussed the Transition Assistance Program, Vocational Rehabilitation as well as employability amongst Gulf War veterans.

The members agreed that the Committee should travel to locations outside of the Washington, D.C. area where there are heavy concentration of Gulf War veterans to include Puget Sound in Seattle, Washington. The members were in agreement that it may be necessary to divide into subcommittees based on expertise and availability. Additionally, the Committee discussed the way-ahead for producing the final Committee report. Finally, Dr. Hart volunteered to initiate a running list of questions or action items for the Committee that will be distributed for edit and comment.

Closing Remarks from Chairman Cragin

The Chairman adjourned the meeting after thanking everyone for participating in the meeting.