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VA Secretary Joins Others in Pledge to Donate their Brains to VA-lead TBI Research Program

WASHINGTON - Today the Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald announced that he, along with three-time Olympic gold medalist swimmer Nancy Hogshead-Makar and former NFL player and Super Bowl champion Phil Villapiano, have pledged to donate their brains to advance brain research conducted by VA in partnership with the Concussion Legacy Foundation.

The announcement was made at the VA-hosted Brain Trust: Pathways to InnoVAtion, a public-private partner event which builds on the trailblazing efforts of a number of distinguished VA brain researchers and brings together many of the most influential voices in the field of brain health to identify and advance solutions for mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI), and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"As I listened to the very powerful personal stories from Veterans and the challenges the world's top researchers are working to overcome in TBI, I made a decision: I decided to join the hundreds of Veterans and athletes who have already donated their brain to the VA Brain Bank so that I may, in a small way, contribute to the vital research happening to better understand brain trauma," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald. "This is a very, very serious issue, one that affects Veterans and non-Veterans alike. We don't know nearly as much as we should about brain health, but if there's one thing I've seen after visiting almost 300 VA facilities in the past two years: our Veterans, particularly those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are greatly affected by TBI. VA needs to continue leading the coalition of scientists working to improve their lives.

"Building more and stronger strategic partnerships is one of the five strategies of the MyVA transformation. Today, we witnessed a room full of the world's leading experts coming together under the convening authority of VA to solve one of our most significant challenges, particularly among our younger Veterans. I'm proud to do my part because I know that the researchers at VA are committed to improving lives and they have my full support."

"Concussions were ignored for a long time and viewed largely as an invisible injury but chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) is something we can see and something we can understand. It reveals that brain trauma can have long-term and devastating consequences," said Chris Nowinski, former WWE wrestler and co-founder and president of the Concussion Legacy Foundation which leads outreach and recruiting for the VA-BU-CLF Brain Bank. "The Concussion Legacy Foundation is working to create a culture of brain donation in America by asking living athletes and Veterans to donate their brains to the Brain Bank to be researched by VA and Boston University researchers. It's a perfect partnership because the most common victims of CTE are athletes and Veterans and by researching both as a part of one program, the sports community and Veteran community can work together to solve this problem. We all need to work together to solve the concussion crisis."

The VA-BU-CLF Brain Bank is directed by VA's own Dr. Ann McKee and is located at the Bedford VA Medical Center. It is now the largest sports mTBI and CTE repository in the world with over 325 brains donated, and over a thousand more pledged.

"The research on CTE all started with VA; it began with a VA patient who was a well-known boxer and from that first case of CTE, it has morphed into a tremendous research effort involving NIH, DoD and many other organizations," said Dr. Ann McKee. "This is not a problem we can solve in any one lab. It's going to take medical researchers and scientists working with business to detect where it first starts – on the battlefield and sports field. We will need health assessments going into the future for many years. That will take innovation and real input from industry to stimulate this research. That's why we need a collective effort and his group of leaders is so important. I'm proud to be here encouraging us all to work together to better care for America's Veterans and patients."

Brain Trust: Pathways to InnoVAion is a two-day public-private partnership event hosted by VA. As the largest, integrated health care system in the country, VA is using its convening authority to bring together many of the most influential voices in the field of brain health – to include the Department of Defense, the sports industry, private sector, federal government, Veterans and community partners - to identify and advance solutions for mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI), and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Issues related to brain health and head trauma transcend the Veteran and military community, impacting all Americans. By highlighting the themes of collaborative research, medical technology, and sports innovation for player safety, Brain Trust participants are discussing the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration of Veterans, athletes, and Americans in general - suffering from head trauma related injuries. The event will also serve as a showcase for many of the advancements that VA is pioneering to improve brain health for Veterans, the military and for the American public at large.

In addition to many of the world's most accomplished brain research scientists, Brain Trust attendees include sports commentator Bob Costas, Gen. Peter Chiarelli (CEO of One Mind, and the former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army), Briana Scurry (former U.S. Women's Soccer Player), Jeanne Marie Laskas (author of the *GQ* article that inspired the movie "Concussion"), Terry O'Neil (16-time Emmy award winner), representatives from the NFL Players Association, the NFL, the NCAA, DARPA, DOD, NIH, CDC, and many more.

For more information on donating to the VA-BU-CLF Brain Bank or to get involved, go to:

<http://concussionfoundation.org/get-involved/research-registry>

For more information on VA's work on TBI, go to: <http://www.polytrauma.va.gov/understanding-tbi/>