

**ADMINISTRATIVE SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATION
BY THE VA OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
IN RESPONSE TO ALLEGATIONS
REGARDING PATIENT WAIT TIMES**



**VA Outpatient Clinic in Tallahassee, Florida
February 26, 2016**

1. Summary of Why the Investigation Was Initiated

This investigation was initiated pursuant to information received from a former Tallahassee employee who previously worked as a Medical Administration Services (MAS) clerk at the VA Outpatient Clinic (OPC) in Tallahassee, FL. The complainant stated that he had information that Medical Administration Services (MAS) clerks at the OPC in Tallahassee were purposely manipulating the patient “desired date” for an appointment in Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture (VistA) to reflect the actual date of the appointment, versus the desired date, when the two dates were greater than 14 days apart.

In addition, information was provided by another VA employee that a paper waiting list was self-reported on May 23, 2014, by a dietician, OPC Tallahassee, for a program called “Be Active and Move.”

2. Description of the Conduct of the Investigation

- **Interviews Conducted:** In addition to the complainant, 18 MAS employees (15 clerks and 3 supervisors) at the Tallahassee OPC and others
- **Records Reviewed:** VA OIG reviewed copies of Job Specific Competencies and Functional Statements for MAS employees.

3. Summary of the Evidence Obtained From the Investigation

Issue 1: Improper Scheduling

Interviews Conducted

- During an interview in another matter, the complainant stated that he had information that MAS clerks at the OPC in Tallahassee were purposely manipulating the patient desired date for an appointment in VistA. The complainant claimed that clerks were scheduling appointments in VistA to reflect the date for which the appointment was actually set, if the two dates were greater than 14 days apart. The complainant claimed this was due to the facility being reported for delays in scheduling, if the actual appointment date was greater than 14 days from the desired date. This practice was not in accordance with VHA Directive 2010-027, and the Schoenhard memo of 4/26/2010. The complainant did not provide more specific information.

- Medical Support Assistant (MSA) 1, at the OPC in Tallahassee, stated that she was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per her training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- MSA 2, OPC Tallahassee, stated that he was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per his training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- MSA 3, OPC Tallahassee, stated that she was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per her training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- MSA 4, OPC Tallahassee, stated that he was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per his training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- MSA 5, OPC Tallahassee, stated that she was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per her training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- MSA 6, OPC Tallahassee, stated that she was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per her training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- MSA 7, OPC Tallahassee, stated that she was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per her training, which mirrored the VHA directives. When re-interviewed, MSA 7 stated that, prior to April 2014, clerks were instructed to offer the patient the first available appointment date/time; if they agreed, then they were to use that date/time as the patient's desired appointment. She further stated that this practice was no longer in effect; however, previous practices were done in a non-malicious manner, and the main problem was that procedures flipped multiple times.
- MSA 8, OPC Tallahassee, stated that he was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per his training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- MSA 9, OPC Tallahassee, stated that she was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per her training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- MSA 10, OPC Tallahassee, stated that he was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per his training, which mirrored the VHA directives.

- MSA 11, OPC Tallahassee, stated that she was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per her training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- MSA 12, OPC Tallahassee, stated that, up until a week prior to the interview, he had always used the next available open date on the calendar as the desired date, instead of the desired date provided by the veteran. He stated that he was originally trained this way when he started about 5 years ago. The change making the desired date the date the veteran requested occurred the previous week as directed by his MAS supervisors. He believed this was due to the supervisors attempting to cover up an improper procedure taking place at the OPC but provided no support for his belief.
- MSA 12 was re-interviewed regarding the current process for scheduling patient appointments. He stated that prior to the Phoenix issue, he was instructed to check the appointment calendar in VistA for the time period that the patient was supposed to return to the clinic, find an opening, and see if that date worked for the patient. If it did, that date would be entered into VistA as the desired date. He stated that if he extended the time frame for the desired date too far, a sheet with discrepancies involving the desired date would be brought to him by his supervisor showing the extended wait times for specific appointments and he would be asked to change the desired date to a date closer to the appointment date, reducing the wait time. He added that this was asked of all the clerks, not just him but that this practice ended a few months ago. He did not remember seeing any memos or emails directing this practice. The practice of using the calendar to determine the desired date changed a few months ago with the Phoenix issue. When asked if he was instructed as to how to answer any questions about wait times, he said they were given a handout on how to answer questions (which he no longer had). The clerks were coached on how to respond to questions on scheduling. He stated that this was about 2 weeks after they changed their scheduling practices in regard to entering the desired date. He stated that he was never asked to lie about how they previously scheduled patients or to intentionally provide misleading information.
- MSA 13, OPC Tallahassee, stated that she was using the next available date in VistA as the desired date for a veteran's appointment. She stated that she learned to document the desired date in this manner from training she received about a year or two ago. She stated that this desired date procedure recently changed to using the actual desired date as requested by the veteran as the listed desired date in the system. She further stated that this change occurred the previous week during an MAS meeting with her supervisors.
- MSA 14, OPC Tallahassee, stated that his managers had conducted training meetings and forwarded emails over the last 3 months. He stated that one of his managers sat down with him and reviewed the appointment scheduling process with him. This manager showed him the right way to schedule an appointment, which was different than he was originally trained. He stated that it appeared that the supervisors were trying to fix the way things were being done. He added that the new way of scheduling appointments was focused on getting the desired date from the veteran, as opposed to offering the next available appointment to the veteran.

- MSA 15, OPC Tallahassee, stated that prior to the Phoenix scheduling issue, she was instructed by MAS management to check the appointment calendar for returning patients, find an opening in the time frame the physician wanted to see the patient, and ask the patient if that date was suitable. If the patient agreed, that date was used as the desired date. The purpose of this process was to reduce the wait time in VistA, effectively zeroing out the date. The method of scheduling appointments changed when the Phoenix issue came up, with management instructing the clerks to first ask the patient for a desired date, and use that date. When asked if management ever directed her to lie concerning how the clerks scheduled prior to April/May, and, if the clerks were asked, to state that they had always scheduled patients the new way, she said that management alluded to the fact they wished her to go along with the story that the new method had been the normal course of business all along. During this interview, MSA 15 commented on how management had asked her to change how she scheduled patients on multiple occasions over the past few years.
- A Primary Care Maintenance Module Coordinator, OPC Tallahassee, stated that he was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per his training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- A Program Support Assistant, OPC Tallahassee, stated that he was unaware of any purposeful manipulation of the desired dates and stated that scheduling was completed per his training, which mirrored the VHA directives.
- An MAS first line manager at OPC Tallahassee stated that he was responsible for supervising and training the MAS clerks that work under his supervision. He stated that the clerks should have been asking the veterans for the desired appointment date per the directive. He further stated that up until 2010, it was common practice for the clerks to use the next available appointment instead of using the desired date provided by the veteran. He explained that if the desired date is not available, the desired date is still logged in and the next available appointment date is selected. He stated that he never has asked or instructed a clerk to adjust a desired date to zero out a wait time.
- The first line manager was re-interviewed to confirm the information received regarding the current scheduling process, and the previous scheduling process that was changed in April 2014. He stated that the administrative officer had asked him to clarify scheduling procedures at the OPC, due to the media coverage in Phoenix to ensure that MAS employees were scheduling in accordance with directives. He stated that when they did review the process, there were no problems identified with the way scheduling was being done. He stated that the administrative officer was a very detail-oriented person and was trying his best to make sure the scheduling was done properly, which is why the meetings occurred with the MAS employees in April 2014. He stated that he was also responsible for going around to the MAS clerks with the Clinic Appointment Availability Report (CAAR) report that had the errors identified on it. He would have the MAS clerk correct the error, which normally concerned the way the employees were scheduling the desired date in the system. He stated that a few employees were consistently on the CAAR report due to their improper scheduling habits. These particular employees consistently

made the appointments improperly and they were corrected by him every time. He stated that these employees didn't understand the system and required additional training.

- An MAS manager at OPC Tallahassee stated that the desired date is the one specified by the veteran or nurse and the actual date scheduled is the appointment date. The clerks should be asking the veterans for this information unless a date is provided by the doctor or a nurse who has a pre-selected appointment date made by the doctor. She stated that there have been no recent changes to their instructions to MAS employees regarding scheduling, but they did have meetings recently to ensure that the information regarding scheduling was clear and to ensure that the proper procedures were being followed. She also believed that some MAS clerks who operated in the past under the old guidelines may have still been doing so. This might have occurred because they missed updated training or were not following the proper procedures out of habit.
- When re-interviewed to confirm the information received regarding the current scheduling process and the previous scheduling process that was changed in April 2014. She stated that the desired date was the date that was requested by the doctor or the veteran. She explained that the clerks should be asking the veteran what date they want for the appointment, if they are at the counter. She stated that this is the current process that should be in effect, and has been in effect since 2010. The emphasis on the desired date became stronger in April 2014, so that the MAS supervisors were certain that the clerks were scheduling properly. This new emphasis on the desired date was a result of directions coming from North Florida/South Georgia, Veterans Health System (NF/SG VHS) supervisors, in response to the media information that came out of VAMC Phoenix, AZ. Even with this new emphasis to ensure that the scheduling was being done properly, the process in place was the proper way per the policy and had always been the way the MAS employees were being instructed to conduct business. She stated that at no time did she and the administrative officer conspire to change anything being done to make OPC Tallahassee look better, they were always responsible, and are trying to do things according to policy, based on instructions from NF/SG VHS managers.
- An administrative officer, OPC Tallahassee, stated that the desired date should either come from the veteran, a nurse at the direction of a doctor, or the doctor. He stated that whatever date the veteran requests the appointment to be on is the desired date as recorded in the system. The scheduler then locates the closest date possible and schedules the appointment. He explained that, previously, the scheduling process was commonly modified by many VA facilities by having an MAS clerk go back into a veteran's appointment schedule. The MAS clerk would then change the desired date requested by the veteran to reflect the actual appointment date, which results in zero wait time. He stated this was a common practice within VA up until about 4 or 5 years ago. The reason it occurred was due to facilities feeling that if they recorded long wait times it reflected poorly on the facility. They later determined that this created issues in the facilities' ability to obtain adequate staffing. As a result, they stopped this process about 4 or 5 years ago when the VHA directive was issued.
- The chief medical officer (CMO), OPC Tallahassee, explained that she was recently hired as the new CMO at OPC Tallahassee, and had spoken with the MAS employees about her

expectations. She asked the staff if there was anything she should know about and a few employees stated that they knew about information related to manipulating the desired dates in VistA. She stated that she was not sure if it was new information, or the same information discovered during an initial investigation conducted by the VA OIG in May 2014. She identified four MAS employees who told her about the manipulation of desired dates in VistA.

Records Reviewed

- We reviewed copies of Job Specific Competencies for all MAS employees who were interviewed for the period of October 1, 2013, through September 30, 2014, that appeared to have been signed by the MAS employees on March 4, 2014.
- We reviewed Functional Statements for each MAS employee that appeared to have been signed in August 2013. The Functional Statements listed, and were acknowledged by the MAS employees, as Specific Job Competencies that were evaluated by their MAS supervisors at the time, were:
 - Appointment Scheduling
 - Consult Management
 - Electronic Wait List (EWL)

Under Appointment Scheduling, the following sub-categories were documented and evaluated:

- proper use of VistA
- proper determination of the desired date
- proper use of Recall or Electronic Wait List and following VHA directives

All employees received competent ratings in the evaluated categories for their positions in MAS and acknowledged their adherence to these competencies by signing the documents.

Issue 2: Paper Waiting List

An employee at the NF/SG VHS notified the VA OIG of a waiting list that was being used for a VA Clinical Video Telehealth (CVT) program called Be Active and Move. A dietician, OPC Tallahassee, self-reported that she had used this list because she had not entered the course in VistA. She kept the list for patients to be scheduled in the program in a locked file cabinet. She delayed entering the patients into VistA for this program, because, per the CVT guidelines, she must contact the veteran and discuss the class before she can schedule them. The class is held every 8 weeks, so she would put the veteran on the paper list until it was within 3 weeks of the scheduled class. She would then call the veterans, confirm that they were still interested, and schedule them in VistA for the class based on their answer at that time. At the time the issue was brought to the attention of the OIG, the employee's supervisor had educated the employee and told her that she must schedule the veteran in VistA as soon as the request is made by the veteran. Since the issue had been identified and resolved prior to being reported to the VA OIG, no further action was taken.

4. Conclusion

The investigation confirmed that several employees at OPC Tallahassee were improperly entering scheduled appointments and improperly inputting the desired dates. It was further determined that the employees had all received the proper training as to the correct method, but were making unintentional errors. Once the inquiry took place and their supervisors began implementing the proper procedures, these employees felt that the supervisors were possibly covering up these scheduling actions that were previously done improperly. However, there was no evidence to support this belief.

The employees who reported inconsistencies in scheduling practices represent less than 25 percent of the employees responsible for scheduling. The training records and job descriptions documented that these employees had been instructed on the proper procedures. All of the other employees and supervisors interviewed were scheduling and entering the desired dates in accordance with VHA policy.

The dietician who was maintaining the paper wait list, for the Be Active and Move program, was corrected by a supervisor, and all of the participants were scheduled into VistA immediately. The paper waiting list for the Be Active and Move program was determined to be a list maintained by a dietician who delayed scheduling the participants properly until the class was 3 weeks away from occurring. This was done so that the dietician could call and make sure the participants still wanted to attend the class before they were entered into the system.

The OIG referred the Report of Investigation to VA's Office of Accountability Review on September 8, 2014.



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