A Message to Our Veterans

Leading Federal Researchers Collaborate to Improve Veterans’ Health Care

The Veterans Affairs (VA) Research and Development program has distinguished itself for groundbreaking research achievements that directly advance the medical care of Veterans. However, to expand the scope and impact of VA research, we must collaborate, whenever possible, with others in the research community who share our mission of improving health care. Partnering with others who have common research interests allows VA to leverage resources and expand the impact of taxpayer investment in research. Additionally, through collaboration we are able to support the swift translation of medical findings into real-life strategies to make life better for Veterans and all Americans.

Among VA’s committed partners in health care research are federal agencies such as the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Combined, the agencies’ resources and unique strengths have produced powerful results and offer great promise for future improvements in Veterans’ health care.

A prime example of how VA and DoD are working together is the Millennium Cohort Study. This project, the largest of its kind to date, will track the health of some 150,000 military personnel over more than 20 years. By providing crucial information about the long-term health effects of military service, the study aims to enhance the health of future generations of service members and Veterans.

Our research partnership with HHS is exemplified by the recent Shingles Prevention Study, which VA conducted in collaboration with the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases—part of HHS’ National Institutes of Health. The study, one of the largest adult vaccine trials ever, involved more than 38,000 men and women at 22 sites across the United States, including 16 VA medical centers. The study found that an experimental vaccine could dramatically reduce the severity of shingles—a painful nerve and skin infection—and in many cases prevent the disease altogether. The vaccine is now available for VA patients and the nation.

This brochure will provide you with additional examples of the transforming impact of VA’s federal research collaborations.

Joel Kupersmith, M.D.
Chief Research and Development Officer
Department of Veterans Affairs

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In the Millennium Cohort Study, VA and the Department of Defense are working together to track the health of some 150,000 military personnel over more than 30 years. The study is expected to yield important insights to help protect and improve the health of active-duty troops and Veterans.

The program is among the first joint VA-DOD collaborations in the area of health care. VA researchers and military health care providers are working together to study the long-term health effects of military service, particularly among those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition to its military and civilian sites, DVBIC has clinical care and research programs at 11 VA medical centers across the country, as well as partnerships with other health care organizations.

The center has research projects underway to study the health effects of exposure to blasts, as well as the long-term health effects of traumatic brain injury.

In collaboration with the Department of Defense, DVBIC has partnered with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) to develop innovative treatments for traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The center has also partnered with the National Institutes of Health to study the health effects of exposure to toxic chemicals, as well as the long-term health effects of obesity and diabetes.

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**Reducing Medical Errors: Patient Safety Improvement Corps**
Collaboration with: HHS/Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)

The primary goal of the Patient Safety Improvement Corps (PSIC) collaboration between VA and AHRQ is to reduce medical errors and improve patient safety. Teams of clinical and administrative leaders at hospitals and other organizations with responsibilities related to patient safety assist the PSIC to train their delivery conduct investigations, prepare reports on medical errors, and implement interventions to minimize chances for error and patient injury.

**Merging Health Utilization Data to Benefit Plan Care**
Collaboration with: HHS/Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)

VA is working to merge nonidentifiable VA and CMS health utilization data, a collaboration that will allow the two agencies to examine and predict the amount and patterns of health services used by Veterans accessing services within and outside of the VA health system. It will also develop estimates of the total cost of health care services for VA users.

**Improving Access to Care for American Indian Veterans**
Collaboration with: HHS/Indian Health Service (IHS)

A VA study examined patterns of health care usage among Veterans eligible for care from both VA and IHS. The researchers analyzed barriers to care—such as distance between VA and IHS facilities—and made specific recommendations for improving access to health care and boosting information-sharing between the two agencies.

**Studying Intensive Treatment for Acute Renal Failure**
Collaboration with: HHS/Indian Health Service (IHS)

The study found that more intensive treatment, such as dialysis six times a week instead of three, failed to produce any added benefit for patients with acute kidney injury.

**Collaboration with: HHS/National Cancer Institute (NCI)**

More than 40 VA sites and more than 4,000 Veteran patients are participating in the Selenium and Vitamin E Cancer Prevention Trial—known as SELECT. The study will help determine if a combination of both of the supplements can play a role in preventing prostate cancer.

**Translating Research into Action for Diabetes**
Collaboration with: HHS/Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)

Researchers will look at diabetes-related eye exam ines and foot care, with special attention given to “central auditory processing”—the way the brain processes meaningful messages—in combat service members who have been exposed to high-explosive blasts. The study aims to determine what types of interventions may be necessary for service members exposed to blasts by looking at how their central auditory processing may be affected and whether—and to what extent—function is recovered over time.

**Research into Action for Prostate Cancer**
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In a large clinical study conducted in partnership with the National Institutes of Health's NIDDK, VA tested whether more frequent dialysis is more effective than conventional treatment for patients with acute renal failure. The study found that more intensive treatment, such as dialysis six times a week instead of three, failed to produce any added benefit for patients with acute kidney injury.

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Involving VA medical centers around the country, this research study will support the critical and final stages of design and engineering, as well as the clinical testing of the production arm. The VA researchers in cooperation with their DoD counterparts:

- In addition to its military and civilian sites, DBVRC has clinical care and research programs at VA’s four main Polytrauma Rehabilitation Centers, located in Minneapolis, Palo Alto, Tampa, and Richmond, VA. The centers provide specialized treatment to meet the complex rehabilitation needs of severely injured service members.
- The Minneapolis polytrauma site is also at VA’s Polytrauma Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI), which promotes best practices in polytrauma care across the VA system. The program’s executive committee includes senior DoD clinicians and VA-QUERI researchers who are collaborating on numerous studies.

**Advanced Care in Prosthetics and Amputation**
VA and DoD have collaborated on a number of research projects in recent years relating to amputation and prosthetics. Among their mutual goals: to continually improve prosthetic design and conduct studies to evaluate the usefulness of various prosthetic models. In what is considered a transforming leap in the field of prosthetics, VA plans to conduct an optimization study of an advanced prosthetic arm system being developed by DEKA Research and Development. DEKA is also supported by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).

**Exploring the Role of Virtual Reality in PTSD Treatment**
VA researchers in Atlanta and Honolulu are participating in studies funded by DoD’s Office of Naval Research to test whether the use of virtual reality technology can enhance the effectiveness of prolonged-exposure therapy to treat PTSD. The researchers are developing and using virtual reality environments that recreate sights, sounds, sensations, and even smells associated with OEF/OIF combat zones.

**Gaining Insight into Brain Disorders**
The Neuroscience Center of Excellence at the San Francisco VA Medical Center—a research collaboration between VA, DoD, and the Northern California Institute for Research and Education—focuses on improving diagnosis and treatment of traumatic brain injury, posttraumatic stress disorder, and other neurological conditions faced by combat personnel. The program is among the first joint JA-DoD research efforts to focus on neurosciences.

**The DEKA arm is at the leading edge of prosthetics research and development. VA has always been committed to bringing the best technology to our Veterans.”**

Dr. Michael Seizel
Director, VA Rehabilitation Research and Development Service
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Advancing Care in Prosthetics and Amputation

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- Focusing on Optimizing Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Prosthetics

  In recent years, high-level planning and coordination has occurred between VA and DoD on health matters relevant to OEF/OIF Veterans, including TBI. For example, the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVIRC) is a DoD VA collaboration that ensures state-of-the-art medical care for active duty military, their dependents, and Veterans with TBI. DVIRC also conducts innovative clinical research, such as studies looking at anxiety disorders and at problems with memory and attention in patients with TBI.

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- Studying the Effects of Explosions on How the Brain Processes Sound

  In collaboration with the Army Audiology and Speech Center at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, VA researchers are investigating “central auditory processing”—the way speech is interpreted into meaningful messages—in combat service members who have been exposed to high-explosive blasts. The studies aim to determine what types of intervention may be necessary for service members exposed to blasts by looking at how their central auditory processing may be affected and whether—and to what extent—function is recovered over time.

- Reducing Medical Errors: Patient Safety Improvement Corps

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