

Veterans First

Issue 1 • 2004

3
Improving the Lives of Veterans by Making Everyday Tasks Easier

4
Sleep Center Offers Hi-Tech, Portable Monitors to Assist Veterans



5
Questions About Your Bill?
Call The Call Center

6
Vital Veteran
Going Global With Her Health Care Skills



A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

“

State-of-the-art
technology... is
making diagnoses and
treatment easier.

”

ON THE COVER

(main photo)

Veteran Benny Wilks participates in upper-body endurance activity with use of exercise bike.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVIS PHOTO

(upper inset)

Respiratory technician Jacqueline Ferguson monitors sleeping patient at Philadelphia VA Medical Center.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILADELPHIA VA MEDICAL CENTER

(lower inset)

Vital Veteran Mary Jo Brady on one of her global outreach missions.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY JO BRADY

Veterans First is a health care publication of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network. The publication is intended to provide information to help you stay well, manage your health care, and learn about health services available through VA. It is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your doctor.

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Dear Veterans,

As you know, health care and technology have seen many advances in recent years. During that time, our Network has kept up with the pace of change by making improvements to our health care system: from the environment in which veterans are treated, to the way care is delivered, to the manner in which information is communicated to and received from patients.

This issue of *Veteran's First* highlights just a few of those improvements. State-of-the-art technology — such as portable sleep therapy monitors — is making diagnoses and treatment easier. Web-based communications like MyHealthgVet are making it possible for veterans to be more involved in their own health care. New or modernized facilities, such as our sleep center in Philadelphia, are improving the quality of care we provide to veterans. And the Care Coordination program will use technology to monitor the health of some of our veterans right in their own homes.

We will continue our efforts to stay on the leading edge of health care and technology by updating equipment, facilities, treatments, and the way we communicate with you — our nation's veterans. I hope you've already noticed some of the improvements we have made, and that you'll experience others to come: whether it's during your visit to one of our facilities, using a computer, or reading *Veterans First*.



Charleen R. Szabo, FACHE
Acting Network Director



Ms. Szabo speaks with veteran James Garner as he is being treated in occupational therapy.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF VETERANS by Making Everyday Tasks Easier

Veterans with a wide variety of chronic illnesses and orthopedic injuries — from stroke to carpal tunnel syndrome and from multiple sclerosis to shoulder pain — may have difficulty completing everyday activities such as bathing, walking or even reaching for a newspaper. The goal of occupational therapists at VA medical centers (VAMCs) within the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network is to help individuals regain those abilities.

According to Jamie Oravec, occupational therapist at the James E. Van Zandt VAMC in Altoona, PA, he and other therapists assess the physical and/or environmental limitations that may keep a veteran from participating fully in the activities they feel are important to them. "This assessment allows us to identify treatment goals, exercises, activities, and possible adaptive equipment or home modifications that will enable the veteran to be more independent," says Oravec. "We also stress the importance of family involvement in the entire rehabilitation process, when appropriate, to provide a more comprehensive approach." Home modifications and equipment can be provided to eligible veterans when determined to be medically necessary.

Oravec states that new technologies such as compact and portable Infrared Light Therapy units are helping improve the treatment given for acute or chronic muscle and joint pain. The units give off infrared light that penetrates the skin to stimulate blood flow and circulation in small, targeted areas of the body.

The occupational therapy clinic at James E. Van Zandt VAMC treated over 3,500 patients last year. "We usually treat about 20-30 patients per day with a variety of diagnoses and rehabilitation needs. We provide inpatient occupational therapy services to veterans," says Oravec. "And in addition, we provide outpatient hand, shoulder, elbow, and wrist rehabilitation."

Despite the extensive work being performed at his clinic, Oravec finds that many veterans and their family members are still not aware of the many occupational therapy services that are available through the VA health care system. "We are here to provide the best care possible to the many men and women that have served in our nation's defense," says Oravec. He encourages veterans to contact their primary care provider to find out if occupational therapy services might be useful in their treatment.

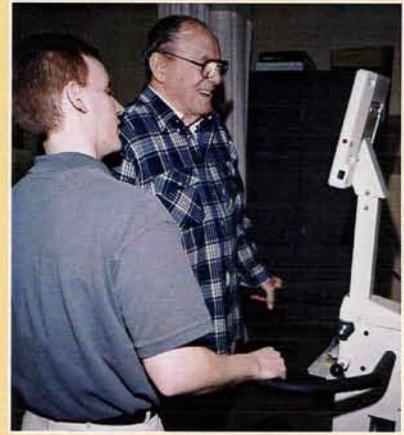


PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVIS PHOTO

Benny Wilks completes balance re-education exercise with Jamie Oravec, occupational therapist.

One Soldier's EXPERIENCE

When Benny Wilks came to the VAMC in Altoona, PA, he said he was a "basket case." The Army veteran had been told that there was no hope of ever walking again. He could not feed himself and had to be hoisted between bed and wheelchair. When Benny left the VAMC, he was walking with the aid of a cane and well on his way to independent living.

"He has made remarkable progress," says Jamie Oravec, an occupational therapist at the VAMC. "He is now able to care for himself with the use of ramps and modified bathroom facilities." And according to Oravec, Benny continues to make progress.

Benny's wife, Rita, credits the occupational therapy staff at the VAMC for her husband's progress. "He had their full effort and attention," she says. "They never gave up. They just worked with him until he accomplished one thing that we thought was impossible, and when he did that, they went on to the next impossible task. We couldn't have gotten any better care anywhere."

SLEEP CENTER OFFERS HI-TECH, PORTABLE MONITORS TO ASSIST VETERANS

Are you losing sleep? Lost sleep can be more serious than you think! According to Dr. Sam Kuna, head of the Eastern Regional Sleep Center at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center (VAMC), there is good evidence that sleep disorders can increase the risk of high blood pressure, diabetes, and stroke. Dr. Kuna, recipient of the VA's 2003 Dr. Mark Alcott Award for Excellence in Clinical Care, adds that veterans seem to be at slightly higher risk for sleep-related disorders than the general population.



Dr. Samuel Kuna, medical director of the Sleep Center, explains results of sleep study to veteran Lester Outterbridge.

Dr. Kuna points out there is growing evidence that successful diagnosis and treatment of sleep disorders – such as insomnia, sleep apnea, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder-related sleep problems – can lead to improved mental and physical well-being. Fortunately, new advanced equipment available at the sleep center is providing

easier access to the diagnosis and treatment of these disorders.

In the past, diagnosis of a sleep disorder meant the inconvenience and expense of traveling to one of the major VA medical centers or a private facility for an overnight stay. However, in some cases, sleep disorders can now be diagnosed at home through portable sleep monitors. The veteran is trained by a respiratory therapist in the operation of the simple-to-use monitor. The monitor records the patient's sleep patterns and blood oxygen levels overnight and he or she returns the device to the therapist the next day. The recorded information is sent by computer to sleep center experts for evaluation.

"Prior to the opening of our center, we were sending 15-20 patients a month to private facilities for treatment and diagnosis," Dr. Kuna explains. "Now, we no longer need to refer patients to private facilities. We do approximately 40 studies at our facility lab and 40 a month outside the lab with portable monitors, system-wide."

As part of the outreach program, the sleep clinic at the Philadelphia VAMC is identifying physicians at other facilities on the eastern side of



Respiratory technician Jacqueline Ferguson explains the use of the electronic questionnaire to veteran Lester Outterbridge.

the Network and adding to its team those who are able to evaluate sleep disorders. These physicians can refer patients directly to the center, eliminating paperwork and reducing delays. "It's another way," says Dr. Kuna, "of making sure our patients have improved access to care."

In addition to the sleep center in Philadelphia, veterans have access to the new monitors at sleep labs in the Pittsburgh and Wilkes-Barre VA health care facilities. The equipment is also being made available at more Network VAMCs through the outreach programs offered by Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

If you feel you might have a sleep disorder, check with your VA primary care provider to discuss diagnosis and treatment options available in your area.



Questions About Your Bill? CALL THE CALL CENTER

Do you normally receive a bill for the VA health care services you receive? If so, what do you do if you have questions about your bill? Well, the first thing you can do is phone the Network's Call Center. In fact, during the past three months, over 16,000 veterans within our service area did just that.

The Call Center was created to raise the level of customer service provided to veterans by making it easier to have their billing questions answered. Veterans can call a central location where the staff can access data from any VA medical center within the Network. According to Call Center Manager Zig Wierzel, the majority of problems are handled on the first call. "All our staff are fully trained to handle a variety of issues comfortably," says Wierzel. "If necessary, they can communicate quickly and directly with Network facilities so that the veteran doesn't need to make another call."

After pilot tests of the system, the Call Center became fully operational in September 2003 and is now handling about 400 calls per day. Improvements in service continue to be introduced. The current hours for the Call Center are weekdays from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., but callers can expect to see those hours expanded in the near future.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WILMINGTON VA MEDICAL CENTER

Call Center staff (based at the Wilmington VA Medical Center) assisting veterans who have questions about their bills.

In addition to handling billing questions, Call Center staff can update records such as the veteran's address or insurance coverage.

According to Wierzel, the Call Center is the veteran's first step to resolving issues and problems with his (or her) billing statements. "We want veterans to know that our staff welcomes any feedback that will help improve our service," says Wierzel.

To contact the Network Call Center, just dial the toll-free number printed on your billing statement.

My HealthVet: Health Care Information at Your Fingertips

Did you know that veterans can access 18 million pages of health care information at the click of a button? This service is now available at My HealthVet, an innovative, Web-based education and communication system recently introduced by VA.

The new Web site provides veterans with a single source of objective and clinically sound health education information. In addition to general information, veterans can access self-assessment tools such as health calculators and a prescription check to learn more about current medications and their possible conflicts with other drugs. There is even an online calendar to help set and track medical appointments.

Plans are for My HealthVet to be implemented in three phases, with the second phase scheduled to be

completed this year. Watch for updates in future issues of *Veterans First* about the useful new tools that will be available through this Web site.

Don't have access to a computer? At least two computers will be set up at each Network VA medical center for patient use. Your local library may be another place for you to gain access to a computer and this Web site. To access

My HealthVet, go to:
<http://www.myhealth.va.gov>



PHOTO COURTESY OF WILMINGTON VA MEDICAL CENTER

Veteran David Curtis being taught how to use My HealthVet Web site by Karen Cavanaugh, voluntary service specialist.



GOING GLOBAL WITH HER HEALTH CARE SKILLS

"The resiliency of the human spirit continues to amaze me," says Mary Jo Brady. Brady, a WWII veteran and nurse, has had many opportunities to see that spirit bloom even in the most dire of times.

"There were dark times in World War II and we received so many boys from the Battle of the Bulge in the clinic to which I was assigned in England," adds Brady. "They felt at the time that they were losing the war, yet their spirit and wit remained." Brady laughs as she remembers the dark humor of the soldiers she tended. The hospital gowns were labeled "MDUSA," signifying an American hospital patient, she recalls. "The boys always laughed and said it meant 'Many Die. You Shall Also'! There was always some kind of mischief going on!"

After returning home on the ship Queen Elizabeth, she began a career as an obstetrics nurse and raised three children. After the death of her husband, Brady joined the Christian Medical and Dental Society and began what would turn out to be a twenty-year volunteering commitment. As a nurse, she traveled around the world at her own expense as part of the Society's global health outreach to help bring health care to those who had no access to medical services.

She recalls vividly one special trip. "About 83 of us, half from Canada and the other half from the U.S., went to China for an eye project," remembers Brady. "We saw over 1,000 patients a day in the clinic. It was a mob scene!" One patient was special to Brady. "We saw one 21-year-old man whose father brought him to the clinic

Vital

VETERAN



Mary Jo Brady



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY JO BRADY

Mary Jo Brady providing assistance at an eye clinic in Hangzhou, China.

from the hills of the interior. He was born with cataracts in both eyes and was blind. We treated one eye one day, the other eye the next and miraculously, he was able to see. You should have seen him doing cartwheels down the hall! That sight made everything worthwhile!"

On a trip closer to home, she brought a friend who was interested in the Society. After fording streams, climbing mountains, and battling insects to provide nursing support in Jamaica, the friend (who referred to Brady as "Boss") turned to her. "Boss," said the friend. "I'll never go anywhere with you ever again!"

Now retired, Mary Jo's last trip

for the Society was to Nepal. She worked in the pharmacy and recalls the highlight of the trip was flying to Mt. Everest. Brady can no longer travel because of her health and because "my kids won't let me – they worry too much!" But, she doesn't regret her years of service. "I would do it again in a minute," she says.

Although she is no longer involved in global health outreaches, Brady remains active in her community. A very young 81, she devotes many hours to her local senior center and also spends time with children as a volunteer reader in local schools. For her lifetime of voluntary service both as a nurse and an advocate for the elderly, Brady was recently honored by West Virginia Governor Bob Wise, who appointed her to the West Virginia Council on Aging.



Do you know a veteran who, after returning from the service, has continued to make an important contribution to the lives of others, his or her community, or our country (e.g., in the fields of science, medicine, the arts, etc.)? If so, please write and tell us about this Vital Veteran. Include specific instances of what he or she is doing to better the lives of others. Be sure to provide your address and telephone number in case we need to reach you. Mail to:

"Vital Veteran"
VA Stars & Stripes
Healthcare Network
Delafield Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15240

CAPITAL ASSET REALIGNMENT FOR ENHANCED SERVICES (CARES) UPDATE

CARES is a major initiative to help assure VA meets the anticipated needs of veterans projected to use our health care system over the next 10-20 years.

In June of 2003, a Draft National CARES Plan (DNCP) that addressed this initiative was developed by VA's Office of the Undersecretary for Health. The DNCP was then presented to an independent CARES Commission for its review and recommendations.

In February 2004, the Commission presented a report containing its recommendations about the DNCP to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for his review. At the time this issue of *Veterans First* was written, the Secretary had not yet made his decision about what will be in VA's final national CARES plan.

As in the past, look for more information about the Secretary's announcement, along with any other information about the CARES plan, on our Network Web site at www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov

IT'S TIME TO QUIT!

VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network is expanding its effort to help veterans who use tobacco products to quit. Overall, about 28% of our patients use tobacco products compared to 22% of non-veterans. Studies are very conclusive that patients who smoke are much more likely to suffer from stroke, heart attack, and impotence, not to mention the many types of cancer that are caused by tobacco products.

If you currently smoke and want to quit, help is available. Your primary care provider can now prescribe smoking cessation medications for you. In addition, each Network medical center offers smoking cessation programs where you can learn how to quit from experts and other veterans. Finally, free, personalized advice is available to veterans through the state quit-line programs.

During a quit-line call, a smoking cessation counselor can provide advice. In addition, the counselor can arrange several phone appointments to help smokers quit and stay smoke-free. The toll-free numbers for these programs are shown at the top of the next column and on the Web site, www.smokefree.gov

If you have been thinking about quitting, now is the time!

TELEPHONIC RESOURCES

State Quit-Line Numbers	
Pennsylvania	1-877-724-1090
West Virginia	1-877-966-8784
New Jersey	1-866-657-8677
Delaware	1-866-409-1858
New York	1-866-697-8487
Ohio	1-800-934-4840

CARE COORDINATION PROGRAM BEGINS

VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network is moving full-speed ahead with its Care Coordination program. What is Care Coordination? It is a VA-wide program that is the largest telemedicine initiative in the country. The goal of the program — which involves facility-based care coordinators, home monitoring equipment, and telecommunications — is to promote the health of veterans with high-risk, chronic diseases and to help them avoid complications that might lead to hospitalization or long-term care. The Network expects to launch this program at all ten medical centers this year.

For more details on these and other VA health care developments, please visit our Web site at www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov or call your nearest VA medical center. (See the back cover for telephone numbers.)

SERVING YOU

VA Stars & Stripes Network

Here's one good reason to get to know the facilities that make up the VA Stars and Stripes Healthcare Network: **You are our top priority!** Dedicated to serving veterans living in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and areas of West Virginia, Ohio, New Jersey, and New York, the Network offers comprehensive services ranging from preventive screenings and checkups to long-term care. At our 10 medical centers and nearly 40 freestanding outpatient clinics, teams of skilled health care professionals — including specialists in substance abuse, prosthetics, and post traumatic stress disorder — are committed to your health and well-being.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Please contact your nearest VA medical center or visit our Web site for more information.



**THE LATEST
INFORMATION
FOR VETERANS ON
OUR WEB SITE**

Any time you need it, you can find accurate and timely news and information for veterans by visiting the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network Web site.

**Recent updates
to the site include:**

- a link to VA's Web site that provides information about benefits and services available to the dependents of living and deceased veterans and to returning Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve service members of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom and other theaters of operation.
- a link to the U. S. Government Web site that assists those who want to quit smoking: www.smokefree.gov
- a link to VA's gateway to veterans' health and wellness: MyHealthVet.

If you don't have access to the Internet at home or at the home of family or friends, check with your local library. Many libraries offer Internet access free-of-charge to the public.

www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov

**VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare
Network Medical Centers**

ALTOONA - PA

James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center
2907 Pleasant Valley Blvd • Altoona, PA 16602-4377
(814) 943-8164 or 1-877-626-2500 (toll-free)

BUTLER - PA

VA Medical Center
325 New Castle Road • Butler, PA 16001
(724) 287-4781 or 1-800-362-8262

CLARKSBURG - WV

Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center
One Medical Center Drive • Clarksburg, WV 26301
(304) 623-3461 or 1-800-733-0512

COATESVILLE - PA

VA Medical Center
1400 Black Horse Hill Rd • Coatesville, PA 19320-2096
(610) 384-7711 or 1-800-290-6172

ERIE - PA

VA Medical Center
135 East 38 Street • Erie, PA 16504
(814) 868-8661 or 1-800-274-8387

LEBANON - PA

VA Medical Center
1700 South Lincoln Avenue • Lebanon, PA 17042
(717) 272-6621 or 1-800-409-8771

PHILADELPHIA - PA

VA Medical Center
University and Woodland Avenues
Philadelphia, PA 19104
(215) 823-5800 or 1-800-949-1001

PITTSBURGH - PA

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System
1-866-4VAPITT or 1-866-482-7488

University Drive Division
University Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15240

Highland Drive Division
7180 Highland Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15206
H. John Heinz, III Progressive Care Center
Delafield Road • Pittsburgh, PA 15240

WILKES-BARRE - PA

VA Medical Center
1111 East End Blvd • Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711
(570) 824-3521 or 1-877-928-2621 (toll-free)

WILMINGTON - DE

VA Medical Center
1601 Kirkwood Highway • Wilmington, DE 19805
(302) 994-2511 or 1-800-461-8262

**Our
Guiding
Principles**

VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network's *mission* is to maintain and improve the health and well-being of veterans through excellence in health care, social services, education, and research. Our *vision* is to be recognized as a world-class health care system. We hold highest the *values* of trust, respect, excellence, commitment, compassion, and responsibility.



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