

Special Medical Advisory Group (SMAG) Minutes

October 12, 2007

Welcome and Introductions

The Chairman, Dr. Thibault, began the meeting by welcoming the Group to the SMAG fall meeting. Roundtable introductions were made, and Dr. Thibault welcomed new member, Robert G. McSwain, Acting Director, Indian Health Service. The intent of the meeting was to present various issues and updates to the Group, and solicit their advice. He then turned the meeting over to Dr. Michael Kussman, Under Secretary for Health (USH), Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

General Remarks by Dr. Kussman, Under Secretary for Health

Dr. Kussman began his discussion by announcing that effective October 1, 2007 Mr. Gordon H. Mansfield was named Acting VA Secretary in light of the recent resignation by Secretary R. James "Jim" Nicholson. Dr. Kussman indicated that it was not clear when a permanent VA Secretary would be selected.

Dr. Kussman gave an overview of various issues of concern to VHA at this time. With regard to VHA's budget, Dr. Kussman stated that VA was provided supplemental funding for FY07 in the amount of \$1.7 billion, of which VHA received approximately \$1.3 billion. However, VHA did not receive this additional funding until after the continuing resolution was lifted in April 2007. As a result, this has left VHA with a significant "carry-over" (approximately \$3.2 billion) over and above funding the President will approve for VA's FY08 budget. Dr. Kussman went on to say that this is an unprecedented time for VA, and that VHA is very committed to using the money wisely in medical care areas that will have a long-term effect for VA.

The issue of "waiting times" continues to be of concern to VHA. This is a very complicated issue, and involves a patient waiting longer than thirty days to be seen by his or her primary care physician. Patient satisfaction measures, a more common monitor for waiting times, reflect that VHA is performing well with wait times. The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) performed an audit recently on waiting times, and concluded that VA obfuscated the results on waiting times. IG suggested that a significant contributing factor is VHA's use of an antiquated appointment scheduling system. Dr. Kussman sent back a response to the OIG where he non-concurred with the methodology IG employed to develop their conclusions and calculate waiting times.

Dr. Kussman referenced the recent credentialing and privileging issue related to Surgery Service at the Marion, IL VA Medical Center that has been reported in the newspapers. This issue is still under investigation, but to date, the Medical Center Director and Chief of Staff have been removed from the medical center.

Several SMAG members asked Dr. Kussman about the status of the Capital Asset Realignment and Enhancement Services (CARES) projects. Dr. Kussman explained that CARES was similar to the Department of Defense base realignment and closure (BRAC) initiative, but on a much smaller scale.

Academic Affiliations Update

Dr. Malcolm Cox, Chief Academic Affiliations Officer presented on the Graduate Medical Education (GME) Enhancement Initiative. There are over 100,000 trainees annually, with a budget of over \$1 billion for trainee stipends. The short term initiative is to expand the number of GME positions. In the intermediate term, there will be a greater emphasis on creating educational innovation projects to define future training opportunities, and increasing educational infrastructure development. In the long term, the plan is for a system redesign to enhance learning and patient outcomes. Dr. Cox noted that studies have shown a trend of physicians moving toward the south, southeast and southwest areas of the United States. He briefly discussed examples of affiliation models being tested at several VA medical centers. One of the SMAG members expressed a concern that not all disciplines are being addressed in the academic training arena. Dr. Cox ended his discussion by providing an update on the Secretary's Blue Ribbon Panel on VA-Medical School Affiliations. The Panel is still meeting and results have not been presented.

Linda Johnson, PhD., RN gave an overview of the newly implemented VA Nursing Academy initiative. The purpose of the Academy is to address the nursing and nursing faculty shortages across the country. The Academy is comprised of two programs: Enhancing academic partnerships with nursing schools and providing scholarships that require participants to work for two years as nurses in VA facilities after graduation.

Budget Update

Mr. Paul Kearns, VHA Chief Finance Officer provided an update on VA's FY08 budget submission. The overall VA budget request submitted to Congress for FY08 is \$86.75 billion, of which medical care is \$42 billion (\$3.2 billion rolled over from supplemental funding in FY07.) The VA budget has not yet been signed by the President, and therefore VA is under a continuing resolution.

VHA Public Relations Campaign

Mr. Everett Chasen, VHA Chief of Communications presented the needs of the new veteran population – OIF/OEF service members/veterans. This population is young and computer savvy. They require specialized outreach programs. In response, VHA has hired "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) vet counselors and transition patient advocates to address their needs. Future communication plans include the increase in the use of the Internet through "podcasts", "webcasts" and "video games." In addition, an educational campaign will be starting on OIF/OEF related illnesses, such as suicide prevention, mild/moderate TBI and alcohol/drug

abuse. Mr. Chasen distributed a copy of Best Care Anywhere: Why VA Health Care is Better than Yours, by Phillip Longman to all SMAG members.

General Remarks by Acting Secretary Mansfield

The Acting Secretary thanked the SMAG members for their energy and efforts in assisting VA to improve our health care system.

Working Lunch: Relationship Between VA and DoD

Ms. Karen Malebranche, Executive Director, OEF/OIF, Office of the Under Secretary for Health, presented a summary of recommendations from various independent reviews, such as the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors (Dole/Shalala report), the DoD/VA Senior Oversight Committee, and the Overarching Integrated Product Team (OIPT). As a result of the Dole/Shalala Commission report, DoD and VA have been directed to establish a joint Federal Recovery Coordinator program. The Federal Recovery Coordinator will be the main point of contact to follow the service member/veteran patient as they progress throughout the DoD/VA continuum of care.

Mr. Cliff Freeman, Director, VA/DoD Interagency Program, VHA Field Office of Information discussed the overarching Joint Electronic Health Records Interoperability Plan (JEHRI). Mr. Freeman indicated that data sharing between VA and DoD has greatly increased. The Federal Health Information Exchange is the system used when the patient prepares to separate from the military, and the data is sent directly to VA. The VHA polytrauma centers and the military treatment facilities (MTFs) are now able to receive/send images from DoD and VA electronic medical records. The SMAG members expressed their encouragement with the progress that VA and DoD have made in the electronic medical record.

IT Security Update

Mr. Robert Howard, Assistant Secretary for the Office of Information and Technology (OI&T) presented on IT security areas such as the use of data sets for studies and research; use of non-VA equipment; mobile devices (i.e., thumb drives); non-IT devices (i.e., medical devices); email; paper files; and proper disposal of data. Discussion among the SMAG members included 1) the type of training being provided to VHA employees on the new medical devices and technical devices being used; and 2) the impact of centralization of OI&T on IT innovations in the VHA field facilities.

General Discussion

Dr. Thibault summarized the day of presentations, and expressed areas to be further discussed:

- Strategic issues with short term and long term implications
- Evolving VA/DoD sharing issue
- Research benefits to veterans
- New Orleans Update
- Innovative programming for post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

The next meeting will be in approximately six months, and consideration will be given to having a longer meeting session.

Dr. Thibault thanked the SMAG members for their participation.

The meeting adjourned at 2:25 p.m.