



## Women's Health Gains Attention

This past June, Joan Furey, Director of the Center for Women Veterans in Washington, DC, and her Women's Advisory Committee visited VA Puget Sound's two campuses. During her week-long tour, she held video teleconferences with VISN 20 facilities and hosted a town meeting to address women's health issues, community services, and childcare for homeless women veterans. The group heard from health-care professionals at both facilities and gained a broader view of VA Puget Sound's commitment to providing women veterans with the best quality of care.



Joan Furey

The number of women veterans currently being served at VA Puget Sound has

increased two percent from FY '97 and now numbers 3,000. They are offered a full range of inpatient, outpatient, medical, rehabilitative, surgical, and psychiatric services. New women-focused programs initiated over the past year include eating disorder management, trauma recovery, pool therapy/exercise groups, stress management, and relaxation groups. Community Based Outpatient Clinics are available to women veterans.

Outreach efforts include:

- community health screening at various community locations throughout the Puget Sound area
- quarterly informational forums at both VA Puget Sound divisions
- networking with vet centers, employment and academic agencies, and military service organizations
- interfacing with active duty components. ♡

## Exercise/Behavioral Therapy Trial

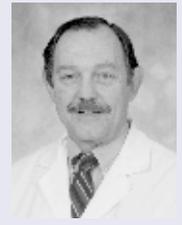
VA Puget Sound is seeking volunteers for a new treatment study for Gulf War illnesses. The study will test whether exercise and behavioral modifications improve the health of Gulf War veterans by improving the symptoms of fatigue, muscle and joint pain, and memory and other neurologic prob-

lems. To be eligible, veterans must have at least two of those three symptoms. For more information or to be considered as a volunteer participant, call (206) 764-2421. ♡



## Comments from the Chief Medical Officer

We at VA Puget Sound Health Care System take pride in being leaders in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) system during the past decade. We have gone through a number of stressful but successful changes. The integration of the American Lake and Seattle facilities was a wrenching change, but resulted in achieving enhanced integration of our services. Seattle patients now have greater access to the superb mental health, rehabilitation, and long-term care services provided by American Lake. American Lake patients have expanded access to surgical specialty care and to primary care in a beautiful new clinic building.



VA Puget Sound's reorganization was stressful, but the outcomes prove it was worth the effort. For example, integration of the PTSD services at both facilities has resulted in a doubling of the number of veterans cared for. The combined effects of the integration, the reorganization, and the hard work of all employees has paid off with a decrease in the cost per patient treated. Our yearly cost per patient is now comparable to that of the private community in caring for Medicare patients, a favorable comparison that will help us as the private sector increasingly competes for our patients. Surgical morbidity and mortality at VA Puget Sound are among the best in the VHA system. Recently, the mental health program has led the country in the combined score for quality outcomes and productivity. We take pride in having the highest scores in the country for patient satisfaction.

I am convinced that strong ties with the University of Washington Health Sciences Schools have been significant factors in our successes. More than 1,000 residents and students train here each year. Their

*continued on page 6*

# NewsMakers

## National Program Recently Launched

**One VA:** The notion that the different agencies of the Department of Veterans Affairs – Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration, National Cemetery Administration, and Headquarters – are actually one entity, existing to serve its customers without distinguishing between the various agencies.

VA's challenge is to provide seamless customer service recognized nationally by being:

- easily accessible
- courteous and effective
- prompt and accurate.

The face of the VA customer is changing. Women veterans make up an increasing segment of VA's customer base. The needs and expectations of Gulf War and peacetime veterans are different

from veterans of earlier eras. Korean War and Vietnam-era veterans are increasingly reliant on VA for health care services. "Customers" include family members of veterans. Customers have new expectations for service. Technology makes possible services that were unthinkable just a decade ago.

VA employees expect greater flexibility, more autonomy and increased opportunities for professional development. VA's success lies in its knowledge base. By sharing best practices, swift processes, and successful initiatives, VA staff will be more effective in meeting and exceeding customers' expectations.

One VA is "I can help you," a standard response from all VA employees, the heart and soul of the organization. ♡

## Therapy Pool Proves Beneficial

Rehabilitation Care Service has developed a therapeutic pool program located in Seattle. VA Puget Sound HCS has one of three warm-water pools in the region staffed by physical, occupational, and recreational therapists with training in aquatic therapy. This pool is used by



veterans with spinal cord injuries, arthritis, and other skeletal injuries. The pool allows patients who might not normally tolerate exercise on land to do so in water. The buoyancy of the water decreases loading and compressive forces upon joints while providing resistance for strengthening, especially for those with pain and severe deconditioning

who have found that they can tolerate exercise better in water than out. The program's long-term goal is for each patient to be able to perform an independent exercise program at home or in the community.

New additions to the pool programs include a women's group and employee use times. For more information about any pool program, call Ellen Ferris at (206) 762-1010 extension 3902. ♡

## Northwest BEST Scissors Award

In June 1997 VISN 20 approved a network-wide resource, called Northwest Biomedical Engineering Services Team (BEST), for providing biomedical engineering services. The goal was to reduce equipment maintenance costs without undermining existing service quality. The most measurable accomplishment to date has been a savings of \$127,015 within VISN 20. Scissors awards recognize effectiveness and efficiency at a local level. Thanks to the accomplishments of Northwest BEST, VISN 20 will receive a Scissors Award at a ceremony in Washington DC later this fall. ✂

## Health Fair

The Patient Education Committee is sponsoring a Health Fair November 15-19 at both campuses of VA Puget Sound. Currently enrolled Veterans and employees are invited to attend. We are offering blood pressure, vision, and blood sugar screening, dietary information, skin cancer surveillance, and more. This event is being held in conjunction with the Great American Smoke Out, November 18th. See you there! ♡

## Congratulations

Margaret C. Hammond, M.D., Chief Consultant, VA Spinal Cord Injury & Disorders Strategic Healthcare Group, recently selected as co-recipient of the American Paraplegic Society's 1999 Excellence Award. ♡

# A Mission of Caring

## Special Care Unit Recognized

Following the recent JCAHO Accreditation Survey, the Alzheimer's Unit (2CN) at American Lake was designated a Special Care Unit. This designation recognizes stringent standards of care in meeting the unique needs of dementia patients.

In 1994, Nurse Manager Virginia Scott instituted "Gentle Care" for patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia. The focus of the unit is to provide a safe, home-like environment for its veteran residents. Each patient is encouraged to maximize functions and increase activities that offer experiences of success. Families are an integral part of life on the unit.

The staff is selected specifically for the unit, and each receives special training in caring for these patients. Over the years, staff members Erika Vinyard, RN; Virginia Scott, RN; and Dennis Webb, LPN, have been recipients of high-level awards for their dedication and leadership. ♡

## Customer Service Council

*"There's no great mystery to satisfying your customers. Build them a quality product and treat them with respect. It's that simple."* Lee Iacocca

The Customer Service Council was established to monitor customer satisfaction throughout VA Puget Sound. To ensure customer service quality, the council conducts on-going evaluations of corrective actions taken.

Periodically, the group distributes tent cards in the canteen dining rooms at

both divisions. They are also designing maps and directional signs at both divisions. Other projects will include the development of an interpreter service for hearing-impaired patients and a comprehensive staff telephone list.

The council comprises 12 members appointed through the AFGE Unions (American Lake 498 and Seattle 3197) and senior leadership. Please feel free to contact the council with suggestions for improving customer service via VISTA mail group: g.cscouncil. ♡



photo by Boland, Washington State Historical Society, Tacoma

## 75 Years of Caring

Did you know that at one time a thriving farm at the American Lake Division provided crops, dairy, and meat products for the patients' dining room? Did you know that there was once a hotel at American Lake?

Join us on September 23, 1999. American Lake will host a celebration beginning at 1:00 p.m. ♡

# Breakthroughs In Medicine

## Impressive Research Targets Diabetic Foot Problems

Gayle Reiber, Ph.D., is studying ways to prevent the enormous personal and health-care costs of diabetes-related foot problems. “Approximately 90,000 people with diabetes underwent amputations in 1996,” Dr. Reiber points out, “and amputation rates in diabetic patients have been rising since 1980.”

In one VA study, 81 percent of diabetic patients who underwent an amputation said minor trauma precipitated events that finally led to surgery. Almost half cited a footwear problem. Because nerve problems that often complicate diabetes can rob patients of some or all

feeling in their feet, a pinching shoe or other trauma may go unnoticed until tissue breaks down. Many lesions are slow to heal; poor blood circulation and infection hamper healing, sometimes leading to gangrene and amputation.

To determine whether specially designed shoes can help prevent these lesions and the associated costs, Dr. Reiber and her colleagues are conducting a clinical trial of footwear in people with diabetes. They are following 400 patients over two years to compare incidence of new foot ulcers in three groups—a control group

wearing their own footwear and two groups wearing specially designed shoes fitted with one of two different types of inserts. “We’re testing the extent to which these shoes can make a difference,” Dr. Reiber says. ♻



Dr. Reiber (center) demonstrates one of the new shoe designs.

## Volunteers Needed For Shingles Prevention Study

If you had chickenpox as a child and are now over 60, you are joining the age group most likely to get shingles, a miserably painful skin and nerve infection.

A national study is underway to determine whether a new vaccine can prevent shingles. “We are pleased that we can offer veterans and non-veterans the opportunity to participate in this important national initiative,” says Dr. Kathleen Neuzil, the study’s principal investigator at VA Puget Sound. Nationwide the study will recruit 27,000 people, and Dr. Neuzil and her colleagues are seeking 1,800 local participants.

Shingles is triggered by the same virus that causes chicken pox. The test vaccine is a stronger version of the one now used to immunize children against chicken pox. After a person recovers from chicken pox, the virus lies quietly in the body but may “wake up” years later to cause the blistering rash of shingles. Study volunteers will receive either the

vaccine or a “placebo” injection and be followed for four years. If you are 60 years of age or older and have never had shingles, you may be

eligible for the study. For more information, call (206) 768-5421 or toll free 1-877-768-5422. ♻



Dr. Charles Smith, Chief Medical Officer, gets the first shingles vaccination.

# Veterans

*Our*

*family,*

*Our friends.*

## *The Call of Duty*

Women enter the military for a variety of reasons. But for two women from different generations, different periods of service, and different cultural backgrounds, education was the major inducement. Unlike most of their male counterparts, both were in their mid-thirties when they joined. Now they both share a relationship with VA Puget Sound: one as a patient, the other as a caregiver.

Viva Smith is an 83-year old Korean War era veteran born and raised in Connecticut. In 1950, she was a divorced



Viva Smith

mother of two, working full-time and going to school at night. At the urging of her older brother, she joined the Women's Army Corps a week



After her military service, she moved to California where she organized the Racketeers, a 24-member band that performed for charity events. What kind of music did they play? "Anything... especially swing!" said Smith who laughs easily and often despite having endured three cancers, twelve surgeries, and multiple strokes.

Her physical limitations aside, Smith stays busy by shopping and going out for lunch. One of her greatest thrills was being invited and feted at the dedication ceremony of the Women's Veteran Memorial in Washington DC in 1997.

Lynda Ash, RN, was also attracted to a military career because of education and travel opportunities, but it took her 16 years to achieve her dream. Standing just 5-feet tall, Lynda could not meet the minimum height requirement to enter the military as she had planned in 1967. During a nursing shortage in the early 80's, a height waiver was granted, and she

joined the Air Force Reserves in 1983. In spite of her short stature, Ash has proved that she can still tend to



Lynda Ash

patients three-bunks high.

She has been a flight nurse on the C-141B Starlifter for the past 16

years achieving the rank of Major. When her unit was activated during Desert Storm in 1991, she spent 6 months overseas at Ramstein Air Force Base and at two Saudi Arabian bases near Dhahran.

Her peacetime missions today originate out of Travis AFB to Pacific bases in Hawaii, Alaska, and Japan. Her unit also participates in humanitarian missions and natural disasters. Ash has worked at VA Puget Sound, American Lake campus, for 24 years. ♡



## Comments from the Chief Medical Officer (cont'd.)

constant questioning continually challenges us to assess and improve our practices. We are proud of the many outstanding teachers on our staff. A recent review of VA teaching services with each of the chairs of the Medical School clinical departments showed that the VA rotation was the most valued among the teaching hospitals. Our research program has also prospered during this period of change. In the past decade we have advanced to number two in the system in terms of VHA research funding. The quality of care received by veterans and non-veterans is enhanced by the superb basic and clinical research conducted by VA Puget Sound's staff.

As I approach retirement, I look back on the dramatic changes the VHA has undergone over the past ten years. Stimulated by the national debate on health-care reform, VA leaders began redesigning a VA that would be competitive with the private sector in terms of quality and cost. We were fortunate to have Dr. Kenneth Kizer serve as Under Secretary for Health. Dr Kizer worked effectively with Congressional leaders

to free the VHA from 50 years of paralyzing rules and regulations. He worked with many VHA leaders to re-design a VHA that is now the leading health-care system in the country. Unnecessary use of acute hospital beds was reduced by more than 40% over a 4-year period. While ambulatory visits increased by this amount; greater efficiency allowed VHA to care for 22% more veterans each year. VHA improved methods for measuring quality of care between leading VA and community health-care systems. The result is that VHA matches or leads the private sector in such areas as influenza vaccine use and cancer screening. These improvements in access, quality, and cost of care will be factors in determining the future of VHA. These changes will be positive factors in ensuring the long-term future of VHA.

VA Puget Sound is fortunate to have a talented and committed staff who will continue to be leaders in VHA. The greatest pleasure in my medical career has been working with all of you. I thank you for this opportunity and predict your continued success. 

## WWI Veteran Receives French Medal

Some 82 years ago Robert H. Benton went to war, on July 21, 1999 he received France's highest award, the *Chevalier of the National Order of the Legion of Honor*. The award was bestowed on Benton by the Honorary French Consul in Washington State, Mr. Jack Cowan.



Private Robert H. Benton in 1917

The ceremony was witnessed by over 30 family members and approximately 100 staff. The emotional highlight of the ceremony was when guest speaker Lieutenant General George A. Crocker finished his remarks, turned to face "Private" Benton, and saluted. Mr. Benton has been a resident at our nursing home since March of 1998 and well loved by staff.

The 103-year old Benton entered the U.S. Army on September 11, 1917 at Camp Lewis, Washington. He soon arrived on the battlefields of France in November 26, 1917. Private Benton served with Company "E", 1<sup>st</sup> Engineers. He fought in two major campaigns, the Argonne Forest and St. Mihiel-Loissone. He left France for home on December 17, 1918.

French President Jacques Chirac recently started this campaign to honor surviving American military personnel, who served in France, as part of the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Armistice that ended "The War To End All Wars" on November 11, 1918. VA is assisting the French in identifying veterans who are eligible for the award. Applications for the medal may be obtained through any VA Regional Office by calling toll free, 1-800-827-1000. 



Benton and great-great grandchild

## HR LINK\$ Is Coming!

HR LINK\$ is a new VA system offering employees self-service access to their human resources and payroll records.

Employees will be able to conduct over 20 transactions including:

- name or address change
- life or health insurance
- thrift Savings Plan
- union information
- salary and employment verification. 

**Back Issues of VA Puget Sound News are available on the VA Puget Sound Web Site**

## VA Puget Sound NEWS

VA Puget Sound News is published quarterly, each autumn, winter, spring and summer by the Office of Public Affairs. VA Puget Sound Health Care System proudly serves veterans throughout the Northwest with facilities located in Seattle and at American Lake. VA Puget Sound is part of the VISN 20 network of health care facilities.



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