

## New Co-Pay Information

As the result of congressional action, the co-payment for a 30-day supply of a prescribed medication for a non-service connected condition will increase from \$2.00 to \$7.00, or \$21.00 for a 90-day supply beginning in February of 2002. Medication co-pays are only charged for prescriptions and over-the-counter medications furnished on an outpatient basis. Co-payments are not charged for medical supplies such as diabetic supplies. Additionally, veterans receiving medications prescribed for service connected disabilities are not charged co-payments. Co-pay rates are the same for the mail-in pharmacy as if medications were picked up at the medical center.

There will now be three-tier system that lowers the actual co-pays for primary and preventive care. Preventive screenings and immunizations, screenings for hepatitis C, breast cancer, cervical cancer laboratory, flat-film radiology services and EKG's carry no co-pay. A primary care visit will cost \$15 and includes diagnosis and management of acute and chronic conditions; overall care management and the large majority of personal health needs.

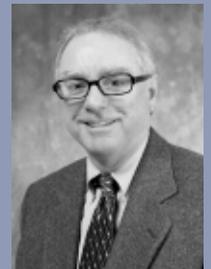
Specialty care visits, care provided only through a referral from a primary care provider will carry a \$50 co-pay. Examples include day-surgery, computerized CAT scans, MRI's, audiology and optometry care.

For more information on changes in copayment information contact: the billing office at 1-800-329-8387, extension 6-2340 or visit the website at <http://www.va.gov/health/elig/financial.html>

## CMO Comments

### Creating Greater Access to Care

The Department of Veterans Affairs, and VA Puget Sound in particular, has experienced a growing request for primary care. Demand for these services seems to be exceeding our ability to meet the need. What is VA doing about this? Let me first explain what primary care is and what we are doing to manage it.



*Gordon Starkebaum  
Chief Medical Officer*

With primary care a veteran patient receives his or her basic care from the same provider/team, resulting in continuity and coordination of care including referrals to specialty care when indicated. Preventive medicine has been a major focus of primary care; encouraging veterans to pursue healthy lifestyles and closely monitoring chronic diseases. Another key part of primary care is the management of a patient's medications to avoid adverse drug interactions or loss of therapeutic benefit due to drug interactions.

At VA Puget Sound, the demand for primary care is so great that we receive 750 new requests each month (9000 per year), but our patient turnover rate is only 170 per month (2000 per year). This growing demand coupled with an essentially fixed budget requires us to offer primary care to those patients in the greatest clinical need while also providing high quality care to some 20,000 existing primary care patients.

VA Central Office guidelines recommend all veterans applying for care should be

*(Continued on page 8)*

# Veterans

our family, our friends

## Pat McElrath

A little before 1 a.m. on December 20, 1989, 600 Army Rangers packed into thirteen C-130's, and raced toward Panama in support of "Operation Just Cause". As the plane prepared to drop the Rangers at an altitude of just 500 feet, PFC Pat McElrath recalls it as, "the anticipation of the most dangerous and eventful moment of my life". When the jump order came, Pat was fifth out of the plane. He checked to see if his parachute opened and then realized that he was walking on the parachute canopy of one his comrades. He scrambled off only to be blown into another. As a result, Pat's own parachute collapsed, throwing him into a fall.

A short time later, Pat awoke not quite remembering where or how he landed. "As I reached for my weapon, I realized something was very wrong". Pat had broken his spine at the T7 level. Part of the Ranger Creed states, "Never will I leave a fallen

comrade... ." Pat's squad soon fell under enemy fire. As a Ranger Medic worked to stabilize him, the squad set up a protective perimeter around Pat and defended him throughout the night with just small arms and antitank rockets. Never will he forget the commitment his squad showed that night to keep him alive.

Months later, after a brief stay at the Miami VA, Pat transferred his care to the Spinal Cord Injury Unit at VA Puget Sound. When he came to Seattle, Pat was very dependent for all his needs and was very frustrated. He soon began learning skills to increase his independence. Physical Therapist, Jennifer Hastings, taught him necessary skills such as how to use his wheelchair and how to transfer to his bathtub, his couch, or to his car. She also introduced him to wheelchair sports. Since



Pat McElrath

then, Pat has remained very active. He has competed in several National Veterans Wheelchair Games and participates in the SCI Handcycle program. He has been a member of the Team VA in the Seattle-to-Portland Cycle Classic and Ridge To River Relay. He serves as a veteran representative to the VA Puget Sound Web Advisory Committee.

Pat recently graduated from the UW with a degree in Business Administration. He and his wife Renee have two children, Morgan, age 7, and Shane, age 7 months. Pat states that "my experience at VA Puget Sound has always been positive and this is a first class facility".

Pat McElrath

# Veterans

our family, our friends

## Alfred Bahlkow

Alfred Bahlkow is a WWII veteran, who served in the Marine Corps (1939-45) and was stationed in Iceland, and several locations in the South Pacific. While in Saipan he contracted tuberculosis and subsequently spent the next three years in a hospital in Walla Walla. For the past three years he has been followed at VA Puget Sound's General Internal Medicine Clinic (GIMC) and the Pulmonary Clinic. "I appreciate that I am usually seen on time for my scheduled visits" he states.

"My primary care has included preventative care such as flu shots and more recently ongoing visits for hypertension treatment."



Alfred Bahlkow

## Barbara Moerler

Barbara Moerler is a Vietnam era veteran and volunteer at VA Puget Sound Health Care System. She has sought periodic medical care through VA since 1976, but did not transfer care to VA Puget Sound until 1995. "Having a designated Women's Clinic and Women Veteran Coordinator made all the difference" she said. She has also been active in the Women Organizing Women (WOW) group. "I am generally pleased with my healthcare." She has been pleased with the improvements in the sensitivity to women's issues. Once a week she volunteers at VA's Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Bremerton and hears many of the same questions that she asked when she first started her care at VA. "What is primary care?" or "How do I find out what services are available to me?" She states "this is true of many women veterans, particularly older women veterans, who are unaware of what services are available to them." She also sees transportation issues as critical to her access of Primary Care and has considered trying to transfer some of her care to the CBOC in Bremerton. She believes effective communication is a crucial component to delivery of healthcare services.

## Preventing Alzheimer's Disease Through VA Research

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is one of the most serious health concerns facing older men and women today. More than four million Americans suffer from Alzheimer's disease and that figure is expected to rise as the senior population continues to grow. Medical research is showing that many people who develop the disease first experience a phase of mild cognitive impairment, which is characterized by mild memory loss without any loss of other functional abilities. VA Puget Sound researchers are participating in a national prevention study to determine if early intervention in people with mild cognitive impairment can help delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

Physicians Elaine Peskind and Murray Raskind head this VA study co-sponsored by VA Puget Sound and the University of Washington Alzheimer's Disease Research Center. The study participants are randomized to receive either Aricept (a medication approved for the treatment of AD) and/or Vitamin E, or a placebo (an inactive substance). They will be followed for three years and will participate in semiannual evaluations of their memory. If a participant does develop Alzheimer's disease, he or she is then given Aricept for treatment.

Once the study is completed nationally, researchers will know more about whether Aricept and/or Vitamin E helps prevent or delay progression to Alzheimer's disease among this at-risk group. It is important to note that a diagnosis of mild cognitive impairment does not mean that an individual will develop Alzheimer's disease, but rather such individuals are at an increased risk. For more information about VA Puget Sound Alzheimer's disease research, call Beth Hutchings at (206) 764-2069.

## Flu Season and YOU!

Flu Season usually occurs from late fall through early spring. Because flu symptoms can mirror Anthrax symptoms, flu shots are still being recommended.

Influenza, or "the flu," is an infection of the respiratory tract caused by the influenza virus. Compared with most other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, influenza infection often causes a more severe illness. Typical influenza illness can include one or more symptoms: fever (usually 100 F to 103 F in adults, and often higher in children), cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, headache, muscle aches, and often extreme fatigue. Although nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea can sometimes accompany influenza infection, especially in children, these symptoms are rarely the primary symptoms.

Most people who get the flu recover completely in one to two weeks; however, some people develop serious and potentially life-threatening medical complications, such as chronic bronchitis or pneumonia.

### People at Risk include those who are:

- 65 years of age or older
- Living in a nursing home or other chronic-care facility
- Diagnosed with chronic (on-going) health problems, including
- asthma or other on-going lung problems
- kidney disease
- heart disease
- diabetes
- Immuno-suppressed with an illness (such as HIV/AIDS) or who are taking medication (such as chemotherapy) that can lower the immune system
- Children between age six months and 18 years and are receiving long-term aspirin therapy (Children have a risk of contracting Reye's syndrome with the flu.)
- Women at least 3 months pregnant during flu season
- Health care workers
- Living with or caring for others at high-risk of complications from the flu

### Persons 50-64 years old - A special group

Based on age alone, you are not at high risk of flu-related complications – yet. However, approximately 10-13 million adults (24%-32%) in this age group have one or more high-risk medical conditions.

### Note to Travelers:

Travelers at risk of complications from the flu who were not vaccinated the previous fall or winter should get a flu shot if they plan to

- visit the tropics at any time of year
- travel with a large organized tour group at any time of year – even in summer
- visit any part of the Southern Hemisphere during April-September

Please visit the Center for Disease Control (CDC) [traveler's health](http://www.cdc.gov/traveler/health) site for more information on influenza and other disease activity in specific destinations as well as recommended precautions.

**You can get a flu shot at any time during the flu season. Employees contact: Employee Health 764-6710. Patients contact: Your clinic or provider.**

More information is available at the CDC website <http://www.cdc.gov/nip/flu/>

# Quality in Action

# Quality

## Patient Safety Innovations Award

An innovative patient care program with the Department of Veterans Affairs drew top honors at the “Innovations in American Government” Awards ceremony held recently in Washington DC. “VA’s National Center for Patient Safety made it possible for staff members at 173 medical centers to improve health care delivery,” said David Gergen, chair of the award selection committee and director of Harvard University’s Center for Public Leadership.

Created in 1998, the National Center for Patient Safety examines how and why medical mistakes happen and encourages health care professionals to report errors. Now health care professionals share what were once traditionally unreported errors so that other VA health care professionals can learn from their mistakes.



*Tanya Henman*

## Innovation Proves E f f e c t i v e

VA Puget Sound Accountant Tanya Henman was presented a bronze medal Real Time Award the VA’s acknowledging her creation of a standardized billing procedure for Sprint Communications charges at VHA. Henman improved overall operational effectiveness by helping to establish a vendor code for Sprint Communications and determining the correct costing and accounting procedures, which were crucial and applied across VHA. Due to Henman’s actions, guidance could be issued from the Office of Financial Management and Budget to field stations pertaining not only to the fiscal procedures, but also clarifying the overall roles and responsibilities of Financial Management in coordinating telecommunication activities through Information Resource Management.

## Why Prevention Matters

One of the hallmarks of good health care is the focus on preventive care. At VA Puget Sound we pride ourselves on the breadth and depth of programs aimed at encouraging veterans to pursue healthy lifestyles. Through telecast programs, small interactive classes and individualized patient education programs, we teach specific skills, explain aspects of disease and steps that individuals can take to improve their health status. Health screenings for diabetes, high blood pressure, cholesterol screenings are examples of how we closely monitor chronic diseases.

Another key element of preventive care is the management of a patient’s medications to avoid adverse drug interactions or loss of therapeutic benefit due to drug interactions. Medication management is an important part of ongoing health care.

# IN THE NEWS

## New Telehealth Service Augments Care 24/7

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (including holidays), VA Puget Sound Health Care System's new Telehealth Line can help answer healthcare questions. After hours, evenings and weekends, you now have the opportunity to seek medical advice. Trained experts are available to confidentially access your electronic medical record, review your health history, medications and provider notes any time day or night seven days a week and holidays. They can provide immediate advice and guidance on health concerns and can make notes into your chart. **If your health problem is serious or potentially life threatening do not delay, call 911 immediately rather than contacting Telehealth.** If your symptoms are not serious, the VA Telehealth nurse can tell you how to treat the problem at home; if they feel you need to see a provider they direct you.

How to reach VA Telehealth:

### AMERICAN LAKE

Telehealth  
(253) 583-1234

Outpatient Pharmacy  
(253) 583-3000

### SEATTLE

Telehealth  
(206) 277-4200

Outpatient Pharmacy  
(206) 277-4000

**BREMERTON CBOC**  
(360) 782-0129

**VA Puget Sound Health Care System**  
**TOLL FREE NUMBER**  
1-800-329-8387

## Broadcasts Now Available

The Center for Education and Development (CED) wants to advise all employees and volunteers of the Monthly Satellite Broadcast Calendar. CED publishes an extensive listing of educational and informational programs to keep you better informed. Examples of recent broadcasts include:

- CDC Clinical Diagnosis/ Management of Anthrax - Lessons Learned
- Small Pox - What Every Clinician Should Know
- Secretary Principi, State of the VA

Scheduled satellite programs, with the exception of copyrighted broadcasts, are recorded and available through each Medical Center Library at both American Lake and Seattle. For more information call the Center for Education and Development at (206) 764-2596.

## GRECC Welcomes New Director

VA Puget Sound welcomes Dr. John C.S. Breitner as director of geriatric research, education and clinical center (GRECC). Previously, Dr. Breitner was Director of the Cache County, Utah, Study of Memory in Aging. Dr. Breitner has led efforts aimed at the discovery of several new strategies for the prevention of Alzheimer's disease using several commonly used medicines, including some that are available over the counter. These prevention strategies include the use of anti-inflammatory drugs like Advil (Ibuprofen) or Aleve (Naproxen) by people at risk. To test definitely whether these drugs can prevent Alzheimer's disease, Dr. Breitner recently organized the NIH-funded Alzheimer's Disease Anti-Inflammatory Prevention Trial (ADAPT).



## Combined Federal Campaign

VA Puget Sound staff raised over \$167,000 for agencies supported by the King County Combined Federal Campaign and over \$34,800 for agencies supported by the Pierce County Combined Federal Campaign. We exceeded our goals by raising more dollars and by increasing the level of participation. Special awards were made by former Mayor Norm Rice, President of the Federal Home Loan Bank at a ceremony recognizing VA Puget Sound with a special King County CFC Travelers Award for our efforts as a large federal agency; special Eagle awards were also presented to Fiscal and Research for their surpassing all goals. Many thanks to everyone who contributed, to the key workers, as well as our campaign coordinators at American Lake: Rita Gregory and Dorothy Inocentes, and at Seattle: Cathy Clough and Dan Longosky, to Tanya Henman, and Ken Hudson in Fiscal; and Dr. Steven Kahn, NancyJean Tripp and BJ Flannery in Research for their special efforts.

# Northwest Network News One VA

## Get to Know Your Colleagues and Travel the Map

Designed much like a geographical map, a Learning MAP displays key elements as well as historical, current and anticipated directions of a program. Each VA Learning MAP represents a high priority goal for VA. Currently, three MAPs test your knowledge about the following:

- One VA – a one-stop shopping concept that melds veteran provider information from the three arms of VA (Veterans Benefits Administration, National Cemetery Administration and Veterans Health Administration) into one source,
- Baldrige Criteria – a business model that emphasizes the value of quality performance,
- High Performance Development Model (HPDM) – a process for ensuring job competency and continuous learning at all levels of the organization.

A Learning MAP is an interactive group discussion conducted in clusters of 8-10 employees. Various map components focus on what is happening in VA. The process spotlights the need for change and how to connect changes in daily work experience to organizational goals and priorities. The process is intended to develop common understanding and awareness throughout the organization. For more information, or to participate, call the Center for Education and Development at (206) 764-2596.

## VA Puget Sound Health Care System

# *Selected as a Northwest Hepatitis C Resource Center*

In its continuing effort to take the lead in understanding hepatitis C, VA Puget Sound Health Care System has been awarded a five-year \$3 million grant to establish a new Northwest hepatitis C Center.

The Center, based in Seattle, is a collaborative effort between VA Puget Sound and the Portland VA Medical Center. "This is an exciting opportunity for us to enhance care for veterans infected with the hepatitis C virus, and will expand on our existing commitment to hepatitis C," said the center's director, Dr. Jason Dominitz, VA physician and assistant professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine. VA is dedicated to improving outreach and screening for hepatitis C by optimizing treatment outcomes, and the development of tools for evaluating hepatitis C clinical care programs nationally.

Dr. Dominitz adds, "The center will focus on finding the best way to care for these complex patients, and will serve as a model for VA and non-VA care of hepatitis C infected patients in the community." VA Puget Sound has been a proactive leader in the region in screening for this chronic infection. Given that lifestyle changes and treatment can reduce the risk of transmission to others and may prolong life, it is important that infected persons receive appropriate counseling.

Nationwide, nearly four million Americans are infected with the hepatitis C virus. "These new centers will enhance VA's ability to respond to a large and growing public health problem," said Dr. Frances Murphy, VA's deputy under secretary for health. "They will spearhead efforts to improve care, educate veterans and health care professionals, evaluate current programs and, in general, benefit all Americans."

In addition to the Seattle/Portland VA collaborative, centers are being established in Minneapolis, San Francisco, and West Haven, Conn. The four new centers will augment VA's existing hepatitis C Centers of Excellence. VA monitors the hepatitis C epidemic and the effect of VA's response through a national registry. During 1998, the first year the registry operated, nearly 113,000 veterans were tested. That number was nearly doubled in the following fifteen months.

Within the Pacific Northwest, from October 1994 to December 2000, close to 38,000 individuals were tested for hepatitis C. Of those tested, one fourth indicated some type of exposure and many have received specialized hepatitis C education and care. "VA screens, tests and treats more people with hepatitis C than anyone else in the country," said Dr. Lawrence Deyton, director of the Public Health Strategic Health Care Group, which oversees the hepatitis C program. "Even so, VA continues to explore new ways to improve its programs. These new centers will function as field-based clinical laboratories to evaluate current practices and develop new tools for improving the quality care."

"VA has done a lot in the past several years to educate providers by distributing treatment guidelines and clinical protocols, hosting national symposiums, setting up a Web site, holding a nationwide teleconference and launching a cooperative study involving 26 medical centers," said Deyton. "VA is in an extraordinary position to continue to lead the way in this rapidly changing area of health care and the new centers will play a critical role."

To learn more about VA's hepatitis C program, see <http://www.va.gov/hepatitisC>. To be tested for hepatitis C contact your provider or the PEC at (206) 277-6630.

clinically assessed for the acuity of their medical condition. New enrollees, who have emergent medical needs, should be seen or scheduled for an appointment immediately." All other new veterans will be scheduled for appointments based upon the date of their request or changes in their medical needs. VISN 20, the Northwest Network, wants to ensure that all veterans within the VISN are being served in an equitable manner.

VA Puget Sound has taken an aggressive approach. We are committed to providing timely access to primary care for those veterans already enrolled with a primary care provider/team. To that end we are implementing a program called "Open Access." Instead of scheduling regular return visits, patients will be encouraged to call for an appointment when they have a need. Schedules for each primary care provider will have sufficient open spaces each day to handle those patients who call in. We have implemented a 24/7 telephone care line called "Telehealth" where patients can speak with a VA Telehealth nurse day or night. The Open Access and Telehealth programs will provide responsive service to those already receiving primary care.

Many veterans have come to think that VA Puget Sound is a "pharmacy" that can provide all their medications, even those written by non-VA providers. VA Puget Sound is not just a pharmacy; it is a health care system. We are concerned about continuity and coordination of a patient's care, including management of all medications. VA Puget Sound will fill prescriptions only when a veteran has a VA-authorized provider who either manages his/her care or actively co-manages his/her care with a community provider. For this reason, any veteran seeking prescription fills at VA Puget Sound must be enrolled in our system.

VA Puget Sound is committed to providing ongoing, timely and coordinated care for all veterans receiving their primary care here. With the new Open Access and Telehealth services as well as expanded Community Based Outpatient clinics, we are striving to improve access for our patients despite a fixed budget. We appreciate your understanding as we continue to identify new ways to handle the growing requests for primary care.



Juanita Berry and Sandy Nielsen

## American Legion Auxiliary Christmas Gift Shop Celebrates Anniversary

In 1947, the first American Legion Auxiliary Christmas Gift Shop opened at the American Lake division and opened four years later at the Seattle division. When the Christmas Gift Shop "opened for business," inpatient veterans were given the opportunity to select gifts for their family members at no charge to the veteran.

American Legion Auxiliary chairman, Mrs. Anne Luke, reported that acting Mayor and President of the Seattle City Council, Robert H. Harlin, cut the opening ceremony ribbon. King TV broadcast that opening ceremony by special television transcription (a forerunner of the videotape) that evening on "News of the Day with Charles Herring."

This tradition has been carried out every year since 1947. This past Christmas, we celebrated the 55<sup>th</sup> Anniversary at American Lake and the 51<sup>st</sup> Anniversary in Seattle.

## Veterans Fine Arts, Applied Arts and Crafts Competition is Coming!

Entries must be submitted by February 14<sup>th</sup>. To enter or ask questions contact: Vicki Booth, American Lake division (253) 582-8440, ext. 7-6198 or Todd Thomas, Seattle division (206) 277-3461

Thomas L. Garthwaite, MD  
Accepts New Position as the  
Director of the Department  
of Health Services for the  
County of Los Angeles.

## VA Child Care Tuition Assistance Program Extended

Permanent authority has been approved to allow federal agencies to offer child care tuition assistance to its lower income employees. Based upon eligibility criteria established for the VA Child Care Tuition Assistance Program, employees are encouraged to submit their application to the Federal Education and Assistance Fund (FEFA) for consideration. Child Care Tuition Assistance awards will be made on a first-come, first-serve basis.

As information is developed, program updates will be provided and posted on the website: <http://vaww.va.gov/vachildcare> or <http://www.va.gov/vachildcare>.

If you have any questions, contact Katie McCullough-Bradshaw at (202) 273-9836; Janice Lucas, (202) 273-9819; or via Outlook e-mail.

**Puget Sound Health Care System**  
*American Lake & Seattle*

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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**VA PUGET SOUND HEALTH CARE SYSTEM**

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

[www.Puget-Sound.med.va.gov](http://www.Puget-Sound.med.va.gov)