

The Veterans Health Administration and the Idea of Wellness

This is the second in a series of posts focusing on the Department of Veterans Affairs. Additionally, we wrote about the topic of patient wellness and whole-patient care and used the VA as an example in a recent [TEDMED Tuesday post](#).

The ideas of “achieving wellness” and “getting better” sound very similar, and certainly have the same ultimate goal of healing patients. But they are not the same thing, at least in the eyes of the VA. As you can see from the infographic above, the Department of Veterans Affairs is big. Really big. The system spans 152 hospitals, has over 8.5 million enrollees, and has a pool of potential enrollees of over 22 million. And with the Middle East conflicts winding down, and hundreds of thousands more veterans returning home, the system will continue to grow. The VA has a tremendous responsibility to support our existing and returning Veterans by providing excellent services and care to the men and women who risked their lives on behalf of our country.

The complexity of modern warfare presents new challenges for this organization. Often times, wounded soldiers are faced with multiple injuries that affect them both physically and mentally. Modern technology and resources are bringing soldiers home in situations where, in the past, these heroes would not make the journey back to their families. In addition to physical injuries, the fastest growing need within the VA is to support a broad range of mental health conditions. These ‘poly-traumas’ require a healing of the mind, body, and spirit, while in other health systems, and even the VA of years past, simply healing the body was sufficient.

Caregivers are always an important constituency when it comes to healthcare, but in many cases involving veterans and the VA, they take on a heightened importance. Whether the severity of injury requires it, or the stigma of needing psychological help prevents a veteran from seeking out VA services himself, a caregiver often is the first one to reach out to the VA. To support this, the VA is developing capabilities and services to better reach our Veterans. The VA is transforming their footprint to support urban and rural locations through their Electronic Records Management (ERM), Telehealth to reach Community Based Outpatient Centers, Community Living Centers and Home Care initiatives. They are developing Innovation Centers around the country to explore, experiment and implement robust programs of care that push far beyond traditional healthcare.

[Adam Darkins, M.D.](#), leads the national Telehealth programs for the VA. Successful implementation of Telehealth within the VA involves the use of health informatics and disease management technologies to enhance and extend care and case management.

Under Dr. Darkins’ leadership, the VA has developed the clinical, technology and business underpinnings to successfully implement and sustain enterprise-wide Telehealth-based services. These services have demonstrably improved access to care for patients, reduced utilization of health care resources and been associated with very high levels of patient satisfaction.

Outreach programs often start with a VA employee reaching out to our Veterans. We must acknowledge that our men and women who fought for our country come from a training, culture and environment that instills strong confidence, pride and self-dependence. Seeking help for health and well-being can be perceived as being 'soft' or 'weak'. The journey towards wellness is often complicated and complex and we do not want our Veterans suffering silently. Our country celebrated Veterans Day last week. It was a moment to thank our Veterans, military and their families for their contribution and commitment. Their journey is long and we should embrace and encourage and support them every day. The VA is making a difference...how about you?

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