

Continuing VA endoscope contamination problem unacceptable, says The American Legion

Legion leader calls for immediate action to eliminate health risks.

WASHINGTON (June 17, 2009) – The national commander of the nation’s largest veterans service organization is expressing outrage at continuing instances of VA medical personnel exposing their patients to infectious diseases.

The Department of Veterans Affairs Office of the Inspector General (IG) released a report Tuesday detailing a pattern of failure to adhere to cleaning and sterilization procedures involving endoscopic equipment, despite an earlier campaign to rectify the problem. The report, entitled “Healthcare Inspection – Use and Reprocessing of Flexible Fiber optic Endoscopes at VA Medical Facilities” was aired during a House Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation hearing. It documented the results of recent, unannounced inspections at 42 Veterans Health Administration facilities nationwide.

“The report is very disturbing,” said David K. Rehbein, national commander of The American Legion. “It demonstrates a pattern of failure among medical personnel within veterans health facilities to acquire simple knowledge and follow uncomplicated procedures, thus possibly exposing vulnerable veterans to serious health risks.

House Subcommittee members have directed the IG to conduct re-inspections of VA health facilities in 90 days. “But these three months should not be construed as a period of time to work on these deficiencies,” said Rehbein. “Veterans are being treated at these facilities every single hour of every single day. No matter what the reasons for this laxness in patient safety may be -- inadequate training, poor supervision or lack of accountability -- the problems must be rectified immediately – not tomorrow, but today!

“Traditionally,” he continued, “the VA’s healthcare system has been lauded as the best in the world, and I believe it still is. It is imperative that this issue not be allowed to compromise that standard,” said the commander.

The latest IG report is the result of a nationwide review requested by U.S. Representative Steve Buyer (R-IN) after he learned in March that more than three thousand veterans at the VA Medical Center in Miami, Fla. had been potentially exposed to HIV as well as Hepatitis B and C during endoscopic procedures.

Even before the Miami revelation, inspections had revealed faulty reprocessing of endoscopic equipment at VA medical centers in Murfreesboro, Tenn. and Augusta, Ga. Among the Fla., Tenn. and Ga. Facilities, it is reported, approximately 10-thousand patients were exposed to the inadequately prepared medical implements. In February of this year, the VA instituted an education program to implement what they called “stronger procedures and better accountability at VA health care facilities.”

“Apparently, the so-called stronger procedures and better accountability were not strong and better enough,” Rehbein said.

With 2.6 million members, The American Legion is the nation’s largest veterans service organization. The Legion traditionally works hand-in-hand with members of Congress, leadership of the Department of Veterans Affairs and other key stakeholders to assure appropriate funding and policy making on measures and issues affecting the military’s active duty, National Guard and Reserve personnel, veterans, and their families.