

VA New England Healthcare System

WINTER 2014

# VETERANS'

*healthy living*

**Treating  
Chronic Pain**

**Providing Culturally  
Comfortable Care**

***Patient-Centered  
Nursing Care***



**VA  
HEALTH  
CARE**

Defining  
**EXCELLENCE**  
in the 21st Century



# Dear Veterans

## A Message from the Network Director

Michael F. Mayo-Smith, M.D., M.P.H.  
Network Director

I trust you had a happy, healthy holiday season and that you are looking forward to the year as we much as we are.

At VA, we want to help our Veterans live full, productive lives. In this issue, we'll look at some of the ways in which your participation in surveys, studies, research, and new programs helps us help you, and it helps your fellow Veterans and millions of other Americans, too.

We start this issue of *Veterans' Healthy Living* on **page 3** with an article about an innovative five-day program for Veterans suffering with chronic pain syndrome.

A great nursing staff can make a hospital stay much nicer, and we think VA has the finest nurses anywhere! On **pages 4 and 5**, you'll read how one of our own has worked for years—and continues working—to determine how nursing care can affect your outcome after a hospital visit.

On **page 6** you'll find a story about a VA geriatrician who garnered a lot of attention for discovering a potential link between chemotherapy and Alzheimer's disease.

On **page 7** there is information about a current study to determine how we can best serve our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Veterans as they leave the military. Also on that page you'll learn about an ongoing study to help those diagnosed with colorectal cancer. It is the second most common cause of cancer death in the United States but very treatable with early detection.

These are just some of the many examples of how VA surveys, studies, research, and new programs—and Veterans who participate in them—can change the face of health care for patients everywhere.

Thank you for your service. Now let us serve you!

Michael F. Mayo-Smith, M.D., M.P.H.  
Network Director



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#### On the Cover:

A VISN 1 employee conducts research.



## VA Mission:

Honor America's Veterans by providing exceptional health care that improves their health and well-being.



# Treating Chronic Pain

Nearly everyone experiences a few aches and pains as they age, and pain is common after an illness or injury. But when there is no known cause for pain, or when pain doesn't get better with treatment, it can be an indication of **chronic pain syndrome**.

Dr. Amanda Adcock, ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) for Pain Psychologist, VA Maine Healthcare System, says chronic pain lasts longer than a normal recovery period—usually three to six months or more. “Most often, we can't find a reason for the pain because nothing shows up on tests or exams to indicate what's causing it.”

To diagnose chronic pain, Dr. Adcock says medical providers must rule out everything they possibly can. If they don't find a cause, however, this doesn't mean the pain is “all in your head.” Instead, she says it is more like your nerves were turned on due to an illness or injury but were never turned off, so the pain persists.

Adcock says successfully treating chronic pain means addressing the mental and the physical components, both of which can be debilitating. She developed a five-day program to help Veterans understand the mind/body connection to help overcome the fear of pain associated with physical activity.

“We start exercising very slowly rather than rushing in. We teach them to listen to their body—not do more than their body tells them—but also to ignore their mind if it tells them to be afraid of movement.”

During the week, Veterans can stay at an on-campus hotel without being admitted.

» For more information, call 207-623-8411, extension 4185.

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# PATIENT-CENTERED NURSING CARE

“Patient centered care” is more than a frequently used term among VA employees. It is truly *individualized* care—different ways of treating each VA patient—that can make an enormous difference in your overall health.

Laurel Radwin, RN, Ph.D., Nurse Researcher, knows this better than almost anyone does. Her college dissertation years ago, as well as a number of research studies which she has since led, examined different aspects of patient-centered nursing care.

“I’ve learned that the nurse-patient relationship is really important,” she explains. “For example, cancer patients have expressed in studies how much

they valued their nurses being attentive and caring. They like being treated as partners in the healing process.”

Study results tend to back up the importance of nurse-patient relationships, even after patients leave the hospital.

“Patients in a Boston medical center who rated their nursing care highly were more likely to achieve good outcomes,” Radwin says. “They were more likely to



## Chemotherapy and Alzheimer's—Is There a Link?

Cancer is a life-changing diagnosis for patients and their families, and the same is true for Alzheimer's disease (AD). Researchers increasingly focus on causes and potential cures for each disease, and some studies show possible links between the two.

Laura Frain, MD, a geriatrician at VA Boston Healthcare System, says recent findings might hint at a connection between AD and chemotherapy, a common treatment for certain cancers.

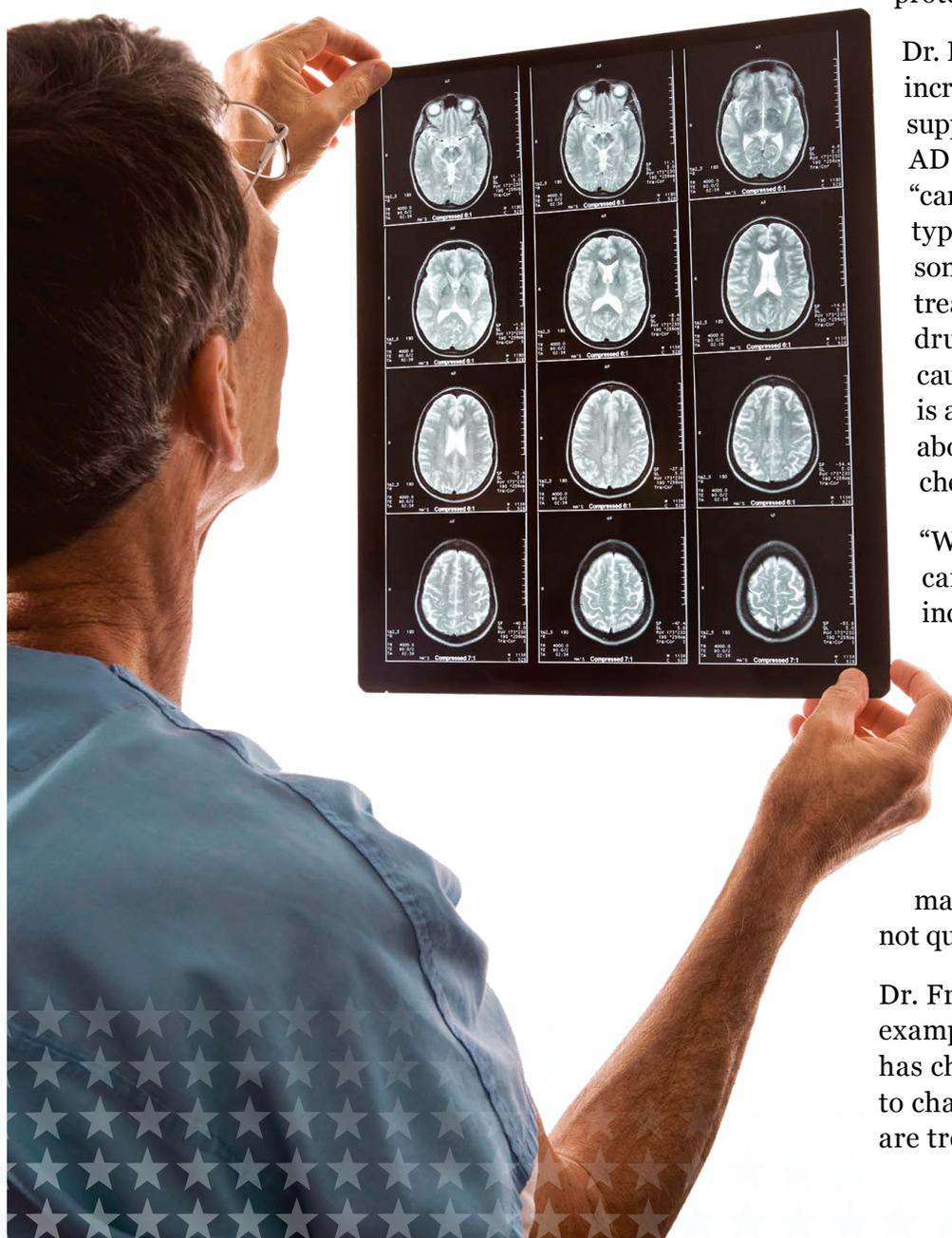
“Our primary purpose was to see whether certain types

of cancer were associated with reduced risks of AD. By studying a database of nearly 3.5 million older Veterans, we indeed found that connection. But we were surprised to also see that, in addition to having cancer, chemotherapy seemed to offer some additional protection from AD.”

Dr. Frain says there is increasing evidence supporting the idea that AD may be some form of a “cancer of the brain,” and this type of VA research could someday help lead to effective treatments, perhaps using drugs like chemotherapy. She cautions, however, that there is a great deal more to learn about potential links between chemotherapy and AD.

“We need to figure out if cancer survivors have an increased risk of other types of dementia that aren't related to AD, and future research needs to look at specific drugs, or agents, in the chemotherapy to see if those agents are the key. We're making progress, but we're not quite there yet.”

Dr. Frain's work is a stellar example of how VA research has changed—and will continue to change—the way diseases are treated.





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