

WELLNESS

Keep the upper hand

SUPPORT

New TeleCC program

COMMUNITY

New England updates

INNOVATION

DNA testing gives a leg up

New England **Veteran**

GROUND BREAKING

PRIME study leads to
better care

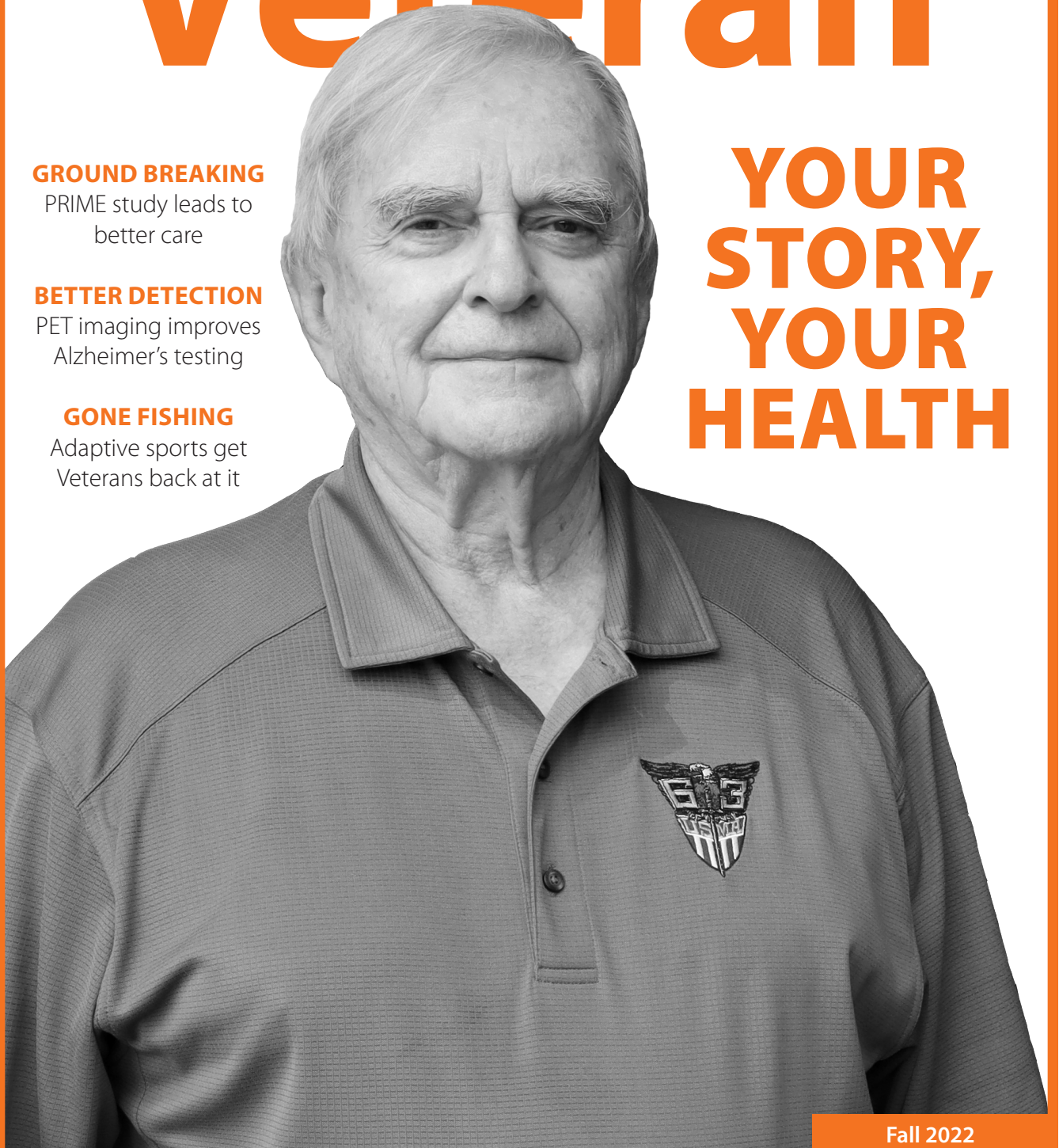
BETTER DETECTION

PET imaging improves
Alzheimer's testing

GONE FISHING

Adaptive sports get
Veterans back at it

**YOUR
STORY,
YOUR
HEALTH**



Fall 2022

New England Veteran

VA New England Network Director
Ryan Lilly

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On the Cover: Frank Lennon, a Vietnam
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Website

www.newengland.va.gov/news

New England Veteran is published by the VA New England Healthcare System as an educational service. The publication is intended to provide information about Veteran benefits from a military-culture perspective and offer stories of interest to our Veteran community. All articles may be reproduced for educational purposes. The publication is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice, which should be obtained from your VA health care provider.



Message from the Network Director

This past summer we found ourselves quite busy, and as usual our staff worked harder than ever to ensure Veterans received the best care possible. While we continued to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, we also faced a new healthcare scare with the monkeypox outbreak.

We also faced the challenge of a nationwide healthcare worker shortage, so our human resource teams worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that vital healthcare positions were filled across the New England Healthcare Network.

As we head into winter, please help us ensure there are plenty of hospital beds available for those who need it. You can do this by getting your flu shot and COVID-19 booster. Not only will this keep you healthy, but it will keep our frontline healthcare workers protected as well.

In this issue, we have great medical news and research updates. Clinicians at the VA Boston Healthcare System found that using amyloid positron emission tomography scans — known as PET scans — among older Veterans with memory loss can accurately diagnose or rule out Alzheimer's disease.

We also share findings from a VA-funded study. It examined potential clinical benefits in administering pharmacogenomic testing in patients suffering from a major depressive disorder prior to prescribing antidepressant medications.

We also report how VA Connecticut has officially launched TeleCritical Care (TeleCC) in their ICU. TeleCC is an advanced telehealth program in which remote intensivists support ICU patients through virtual technologies and clinical information systems.

You can find all these great stories and more in this fall issue.

With thanks for your service,

Ryan Lilly, MPA
Network Director



Dr. Shereef Elnahal, the Under Secretary for Health, visits VA Boston, in early October, to talk about VHA's priorities, identifying key areas to focus VHA resources, time and attention going forward for the upcoming years. (Pictured from left: Ryan Lilly, VISN 1 Network Director, Dr. Latha Sivaprasad, VISN 1 Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Steven Lieberman, VHA Deputy Under Secretary for Health, Dr. Shereef Elnahal, VHA Under Secretary for Health, Cecilia McVey, BSN, MHA, CAN Associate Director for Nursing and Patient Services, Michael E. Charness, MD Chief of Staff, and Vince Ng, VA Boston Healthcare System Director.)

Memory care

Studies find that amyloid PET imaging improves care of Veterans with memory problems

Story and photo by
Winfield S. Danielson, VA,
Boston Healthcare System

Clinicians at the VA Boston Healthcare System (HCS) found that using amyloid positron emission tomography scans — known as PET scans — among older Veterans with memory loss can accurately diagnose or rule out Alzheimer's disease, according to two recent studies published.

The researchers determined the scans were appropriately ordered by VA Boston clinicians and they had an important impact on clinical care and management of patients, according to one of the studies. Both studies were published on Aug. 17 in *Alzheimer's & Dementia: Translational Research & Clinical Interventions* by the VA Center for Translational Cognitive Neuroscience researchers at the VA Boston HCS.



Dr. Katherine Turk, a neurologist and researcher at VA Boston Healthcare System and the Boston University Alzheimer's Disease Research Center, demonstrates a computed tomography, or CT, scanner used for positron emission tomography, known as PET, with Dr. Garrett Friedman, a behavioral neurology fellow, at the VA Boston Jamaica Plain campus on July 21, 2022.

The pair of studies included 565 Veteran patients of the Memory Disorders Clinic at VA Boston HCS, who reported memory complaints. Researchers determined that amyloid PET scans were ordered for a little over a third of Veterans in the clinic. They would also most likely be ordered for younger Veterans suspected of having Alzheimer's disease. Nearly all orders adhered to appropriate use criteria. Positive scans were associated with less diagnostic variability, required fewer additional tests, had greater rates

of Alzheimer's disease medication prescriptions, and more referrals for further research.

"We found these scans were often ordered to 'rule out' Alzheimer's disease, allowing clinicians to focus on other possible diagnoses. Amyloid scans may be used in a similar way throughout the country if they become covered by insurance, which I hope will happen soon," added Dr. Andrew Budson, chief of Cognitive Behavioral Neurology at VA Boston HCS, professor of neurology at the

Boston University School of Medicine, associate director of the Boston University Alzheimer's Disease Center and the senior author of one of the Aug. 17 studies.

View the studies on the Alzheimer's Association website:

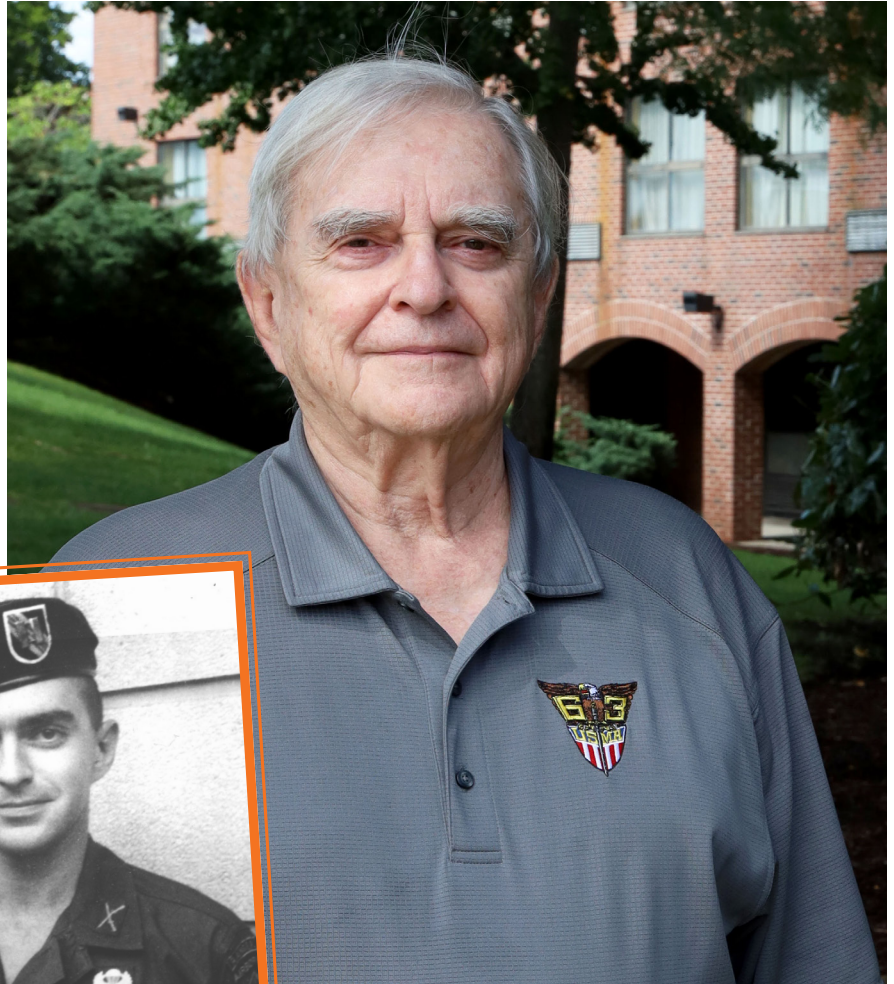
- [**Impact of amyloid PET in the clinical care of veterans in a tertiary memory disorders clinic**](#)
- [**Amyloid PET ordering practices in a memory disorders clinic**](#)

Getting the word out

Story and photo by Russ Tippetts, Senior Editor & Writer, Coast Guard Veteran

Frank Lennon, a Vietnam Veteran and West Point graduate, has made it his mission to tell your story from your perspective.

"God gave me a talent for the written word, and over the years I've been very aware that the foundation for many successes has been the ability to communicate effectively. As a Veteran myself, and one who has seen combat, I want to use my ability to support Veteran causes and keep the memories of our military heroes alive for future generations," said Lennon, a decorated Green Beret and the Veterans columnist for the *Providence Journal* in Rhode Island.



Lennon served one full tour in Vietnam and one extension, during which time he earned the Bronze Star for Valor. For his exemplary service, Lennon was awarded the Purple Heart, the Air Medal and two Army commendations for heroism.

He has utilized VA health care for 50 years, following service-connected disabilities from his time in Vietnam.

"I have always felt that the actual medical care I received from the VA was excellent. Like many others, my frustration was with the administration and the bureaucracy, especially relating to getting specialty appointments and processing claims," said Lennon. "But that is old news. I am well aware of the advances the VA has made in recent years and I think the administrative improvements are significant."

Lennon, who has been doing freelance journalism work for nearly 60 years, now uses his voice to encourage younger generations of Veterans to seek out and get the benefits they're entitled to.

"I know officials within the VA are always frustrated by the tens of thousands of Veterans who do not claim benefits (especially medical) to which they are entitled," said Lennon. "The reasons vary: some distrust the medical care provided based on old horror stories, while some are driven away by the bureaucracy and paperwork—which can be daunting at times. I encourage all Veterans to take advantage of your VA benefits; you've earned them. Don't allow yourself to get put off by bureaucratic hurdles. There are Veteran Service Organizations out there that can help you."

When asked what advice he has for Veterans to stay active, Lennon responded, "It is especially important for older Veterans to keep moving. Exercise, whether it be walking, gardening or age-friendly sports, such as golfing, bowling or even curling, keeps joints lubricated and muscles limbered up. So, what's the best exercise? The best answer I've heard is, 'Whatever you like to do best.' If you like it, chances are you'll keep doing it."



In addition to advocating for Veterans, Lennon wants to help educate the public on the role the military plays in society. "I am dismayed at the lack of connection of the average American with anything military. This country has now reared a third generation that cannot tell a colonel from a sergeant, a howitzer from a tank, or a battleship from an aircraft carrier. Even with our extended involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq, only the direct families of those who are deployed seem to truly comprehend what it means to serve," said Lennon.

Lennon added, "Compounding this problem is the dwindling number of elected officials who have ever served in the military. As a result, many of those we elect today to make our tough political decisions — especially financial decisions — have little vested interest in military

or Veterans' issues."

Lennon, who retired with the rank of major, has always been an advocate for educating the public on all things military. He led an unsuccessful decades-long bid to bring an aircraft carrier to Narragansett Bay, where it would have served as a museum and education center, much like the USS Intrepid in New York City.

Lennon's weekly column appears on Mondays in the *Providence Journal*. If you have a story idea about Rhode Island Veterans, please contact Frank Lennon at veteranscolumn@providencejournal.com.

Don't let your hand take the fall

Take steps to avoid these common tendon injuries this holiday season

Story and photos by Dina Galvin, Orthopedic Hand Surgeon, VA Boston Healthcare System



The fall season in New England is one of the most beautiful times of year. While it is a great time for fun and celebrations, there are a couple common activities that leave you open to hand injuries. For many people, carving a pumpkin or turkey is an annual rite of passage. And it is also not uncommon to accidentally cut your hand doing either one. Unfortunately, carving injuries can be very serious. Tendon injuries are some of the most common places where people are prone to hurt themselves.

What is a tendon?

Tendons are cordlike structures that connect muscles to bones. These allow your joints to move. The flexor tendons are on the palm side of your hand. These allow you to bend your fingers and thumb. You use these to make a fist, pick up objects, and grip objects tightly. There are nine flexor tendons that work to move the joints of your fingers.

The extensor tendons are on the back of your hand. These allow you to straighten your fingers and thumb and enable you to release objects or loosen your grip on objects. There are 12 extensor tendons that work in the hand to extend the fingers and thumb.

Common tendon injuries: Complete lacerations

These require surgery. The tendons need to be fixed within 1-2 weeks after injury or they retract like rubber bands and lose their stretch (and their blood supply) and then do not heal. Do not wait if a tendon injury is suspected!

Carving tips:

- 1) Carve in a well-lit area.
- 2) Keep everything dry, including the cutting area, hands, knife and cutting board.
- 3) Use a pumpkin carving kit on Halloween.
- 4) Never cut toward yourself. Never cut toward your free hand either. Don't place your hand underneath the blade to catch the turkey meat.
- 5) Have a great holiday season and be safe!



Common tendon injuries: Tendon lacerations

Any sharp object penetrating the skin can lacerate/cut the tendons. It can occur when using a knife to carve, or while working with objects like box cutters or sheet metal. You can hurt yourself just using a simple butter knife. It can even happen if you fall while holding fragile objects, such as glass or ceramic bowls. Larger lacerations can occur while using industrial equipment like table saws, snow blowers, and even lawn mowers.



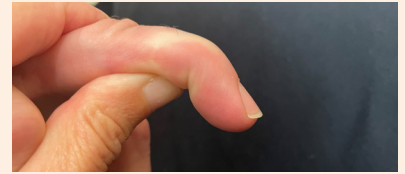
What to do if you cut yourself?

- 1) Bleeding from minor cuts should stop quickly. Use a clean cloth and apply direct pressure. Rinse the wound in clean water once the bleeding has stopped.
- 2) If continuous pressure cannot stop or slow the bleeding after 15 minutes, get to an Emergency Room. Call 911 or have someone drive you as you may have lost too much blood to drive safely.
- 3) Sometimes it is difficult to determine how deep a knife blade penetrated. The symptoms of a tendon injury include the inability to fully bend or straighten the finger or thumb, drooping of the finger in either flexion or extension, and pain and swelling in the finger with flexion and/or extension.

Treatment for partial lacerations:

Sometimes just part of the tendon is cut. These have potential to heal on their own but still need to be protected as they can go on to become complete tears. Protection is provided by a splint. Assessment by a hand surgeon is necessary to make this diagnosis and treatment plan.

Tendon injuries: Mallet Finger



The mallet finger happens when it is hyper flexed at the fingertip. The finger is then unable to fully extend or straighten. The tendon is torn from the bone so it can no longer straighten out through the end of the finger. Treatment is generally with a splint but occasionally requires surgery if a large bone fragment is broken off too.

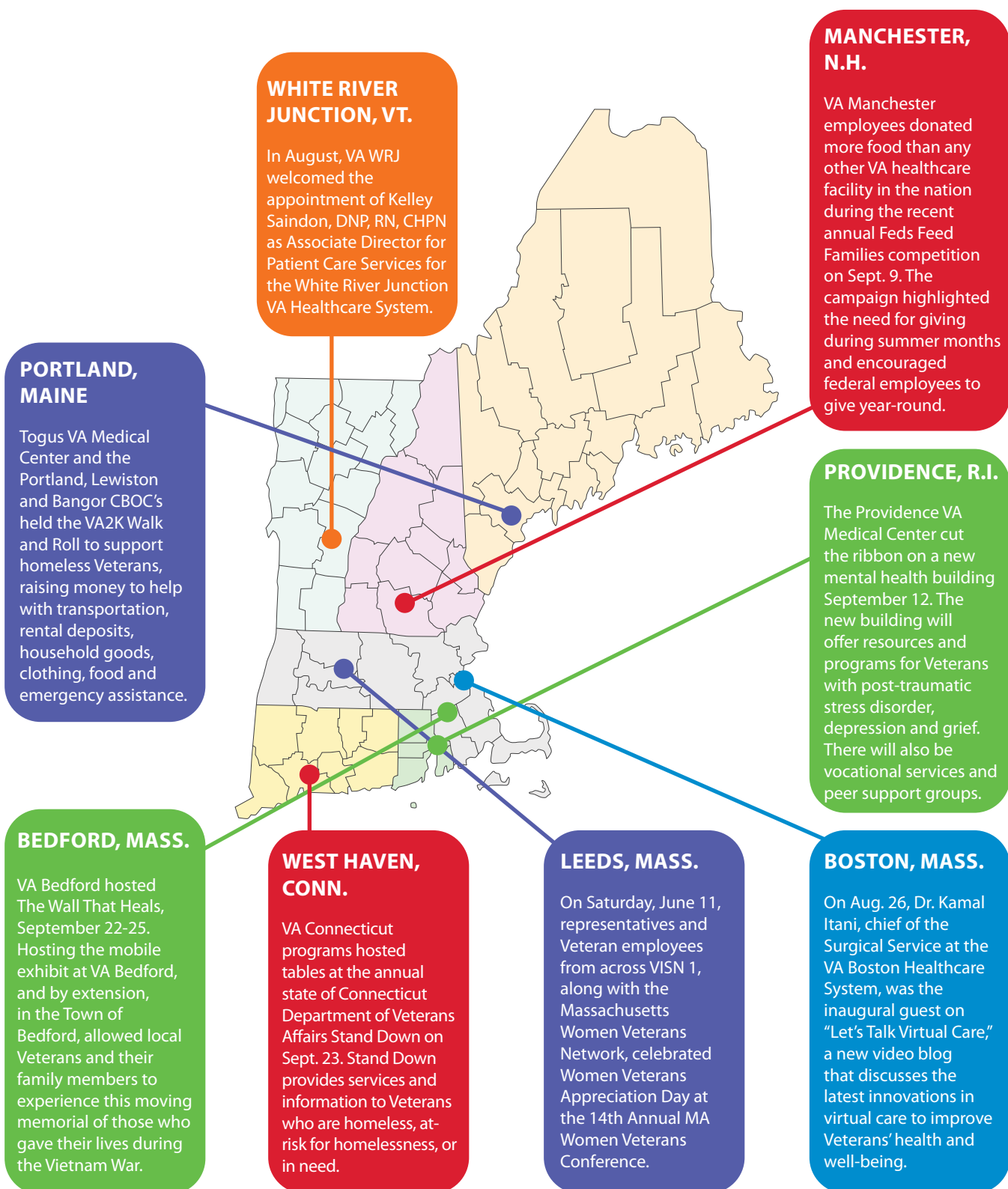
Tendon injuries: Jersey Finger

This is an injury to the tip of the finger — to the flexor tendon on the palm side of the hand. The fingertip loses the ability to flex at the fingertip from disruption of the flexor tendon. To restore the flexion of the finger, surgery is required. Surgery should be performed within 1-2 weeks to maximize the chance of a successful repair and prevent weakness and/or deformity.



If you suspect you may have a hand injury, or to make an appointment, reach out to your Patient Aligned Care Team or call the Boston VA Orthopedic Hand Clinic at 857.364.4270.

To read about each of these headline stories, visit the VA New England “News” page at **www.newengland.va.gov/news**



TeleCritical Care goes live



A ribbon-cutting for the new TeleCritical Care advanced telehealth program at VA Connecticut took place on Aug. 16, 2022.



VA Connecticut staff, including Acting Director Russell Armstead, center, applaud as the TeleCritical Care monitoring equipment goes online.

Story and photos by Jhunathyn M. Ellis, Public Affairs Specialist, VA Connecticut

On Aug. 16, VA Connecticut officially launched TeleCritical Care (TeleCC) in the ICU with a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

TeleCC is an advanced telehealth program through which remote intensivists support ICU patients through virtual technologies and clinical information systems. Remote providers have access to bedside clinical data and assess Veterans through video conferencing. They provide consultative recommendations or intervene in patient care as desired by the local ICU staff.

VA Connecticut has developed a partnership with the TeleCC monitoring center. Bedside data goes to providers in the Minneapolis and Cincinnati TeleCritical Care Centers (West and East) and a national network of TeleCritical Care sub-hubs. In addition, each ICU room is equipped with teleconferencing equipment, allowing bidirectional audio and video communication between local providers, patients and remote TeleCC staff.

TeleCC exemplifies how VA leverages advanced technologies to provide quality services. It adds an additional layer of monitoring to standard care and increased access to intensive care expertise while working collaboratively with bedside teams. TeleCC services continuously monitors ICU patients, even when local providers are out of the room assisting other critical patients.

Remote video assessments begin with a TeleCC provider virtually entering an ICU room. When virtually entering a room, the remote provider becomes visible to local staff and the Veteran on a dedicated room monitor. By ensuring that local staff and the Veteran can see the remote staff during the assessment, the system mimics the periodic entrance and exit of a local provider when checking on a hospitalized patient. In addition, the camera movement and position ensure that the Veteran and local staff know when video monitoring is occurring. The video is not recorded.

Within reach

Veterans rediscover their love of sports at the Summer Adaptive Sports Clinic

Story by Russ Tippetts, Senior Editor & Writer, Coast Guard Veteran

VA New England held its annual Summer Adaptive Sports Clinic, July 11-15. Thirty-six Veterans traveled to Rhode Island for the clinic, which was hosted by the VA Boston and VA Providence Healthcare Systems.



Veterans participate in sailing as a part of the annual summer Adaptive Sports Clinic, July 13, 2022. Photo by Russ Tippetts, Senior Editor & Writer, Coast Guard Veteran



Veterans participated in deep sea fishing as a part of the annual summer Adaptive Sports Clinic, July 14, 2022. Thirty-six Veterans traveled to Rhode Island for the clinic, which was hosted by the VA Boston and VA Providence Healthcare Systems. Photo by Winfield S. Danielson, VA, Boston Healthcare System.

The summer sports clinic is a rehabilitation sports and recreation program which provides hands-on adaptive sports and fitness instruction for military Veterans from across the country. The participating Veterans had a range of disabilities, including traumatic brain injury (TBI), polytrauma, spinal cord injury or loss of limb. During the five-day clinic, Veterans engaged in golfing, sailing, surfing, kayaking, cycling and deep-sea fishing.

“Adaptive sports and recreation help Veterans with disabilities participate in activities they may have felt were out of reach,” said Jenny Vulpis, adaptive sports case manager for the VA Boston Healthcare System. “It’s a powerful experience that can build camaraderie between Veterans and lead to a lifelong passion for sports.”

The clinic complements the therapy Veterans receive in daily rehabilitation programs at VA facilities across the country. Learning adaptive sports helps Veterans discover new ways to gain motivation, improve independence and achieve a healthier lifestyle.

VA is committed to improving the quality of life for Veterans with disabilities. Participants can develop sports skills and take part in a variety of adaptive sports workshops. Clinic participation demonstrates that having a physical or visual disability is not an obstacle to an active, rewarding life.

In addition to regional adaptive sports clinics, VA also offers a national sports clinic. To learn more about the National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic, please visit: www.summersportsclinic.va.gov.

New England **VETERAN**

Study uncovers testing benefits in mental health care treatments

The PRecision Medicine In MEntal Health Care, or PRIME Care, study found clinical benefits in administering pharmacogenomic testing in patients suffering from a major depressive disorder prior to prescribing antidepressant medications. Pharmacogenomic testing studies a person's genetic make-up to see how their DNA processes different medications. This helps in selecting antidepressants and in avoiding medications for certain people.

The findings were announced by VA Boston Healthcare System researchers who joined the Cpl. Michael J. Crescenzo VA Medical Center in Philadelphia, Pa., in the \$12 million VA-funded study. It is the largest clinical trial to date, examining drug-gene interactions in patients with depression. Veterans can sign up through the Pharmacogenomic Testing for Veterans, or PHASER, program. Learn more about the PHASER program at cancer.va.gov/phaser.asp.



The study is available at <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2794053>.