

VA New England Healthcare System

SPRING 2018

VETERANS'

healthy living

*Tackling
Pain with
Acupuncture*

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs



A Message from the Editor

Maureen Heard
Chief Communications Officer

Dear Veterans,

There's such a feeling of hopefulness at this time of the year. As the snow melts and flowers bloom, there's a feeling in the air that anything's possible. Here at VISN 1, this hopeful feeling is felt throughout our VA medical centers and outpatient clinics, where great things are happening to help Veterans overcome health challenges.

Managing weight is something many of us struggle with — but for some it can feel insurmountable. However, breakthroughs in obesity research are happening, and some of the most significant work is happening here in VISN 1! Read on page 3 about the latest research in leptin hormone therapy by Christos Mantzoros, Chief of the Endocrinology Section at the VA Boston Healthcare System.

One significant health obstacle is pain management. When the opioid crisis hit unprecedented levels in 2016, the medical community at-large and within the VA knew it was time to take action. Read on page 4 about the steps the VA is taking to reduce the amount of opioid prescriptions to Veterans. And, learn about the alternative pain management options gaining traction.

Acupuncture is one way that the VA helps Veterans manage pain without prescription drugs. Read more on page 6 about this ancient practice that is giving some Veterans a new lease on life.

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

Maureen Heard
Chief Communications Officer



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ON THE COVER:

The VA Connecticut clinic on West Haven campus offers Battlefield Acupuncture — a therapy that's helped Veterans reduce their use or wean entirely off narcotics and other medications. Pictured, Daniel Federman, MD, applies acupuncture to the ear of Veteran John Deleone.



VA Researcher Finds Hormone Treatment for Obesity



Christos Mantzoros, MD, DSc, (middle) accepted the 2017 TOPS Research Achievement Award last November from the Obesity Society for his research on the hormone leptin. Also pictured: (left) TOPS Board Member Deanna Bies and (right) TOPS President Barbara Cady.

Mantzoros was the first scientist to document the role of the hormone leptin in regulating hunger in humans. Leptin comes from the Greek word “leptos” (meaning thin). When secreted by fat cells, it appeared to switch off the urge to eat in preclinical animal studies. In the mid-1990s, the discovery led researchers to believe they had finally found a treatment for obesity. But those findings did not translate to humans who are overweight or obese. Mantzoros and his colleagues soon realized that fat tissue is not an inactive energy storage organ. Instead, it is an active endocrine organ secreting hormones. Because of this discovery, endocrinologists look at metabolic disorders differently. Mantzoros has been developing leptin and other hormones as a treatment. Largely based on his studies, leptin was recently approved for some patients.

“With obesity, there is often also high blood pressure and diabetes. By turning several newly discovered hormones into medications, we are helping patients lose weight, and achieve lower blood pressure, improved diabetes and, ultimately, avoid strokes and heart attacks,” he said.

Can new medicines treat obesity and its linked illnesses? Can healthy fats found in a Mediterranean-type diet prevent obesity and cholesterol problems? Yes, says the Chief of the Endocrinology Section at the VA Boston Healthcare System Christos Mantzoros, MD, DSc.

“Obesity, diabetes and associated ailments, such as cardiovascular diseases, strokes and some kinds of cancer, are the epidemics of the 21st century,” said Mantzoros, who is also a Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School and editor-in-chief of the journal *Metabolism*.

Mantzoros keeps a healthy weight by exercising daily. He also eats a Mediterranean diet with healthy fats like walnuts and olive oil. He’s performed experiments where eating walnuts in moderation improved cholesterol levels and decreased hunger in humans. A recent study led by Mantzoros at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC) showed consuming a handful of walnuts will stimulate an area in the brain that regulates hunger and cravings.

Reducing Pain One Veteran at a Time

Chronic pain is a condition many Veterans share. One Veteran may have pain because of trauma endured on the battlefield. Another Veteran may have pain due to an aging back, limbs and joints. With half of all Veterans who are VA patients suffering from chronic pain, VA has made pain management a top priority. In the past, doctors frequently prescribed pain medications, called opioids, to reduce pain. But opioid use can be dangerous — leading to addiction and sometimes death. For that reason, the VA has widened its focus. It now takes a comprehensive, multicultural, integrated, system-wide approach at tackling pain.



Moving away from opioids

Across the United States, opioid overdoses have reached new heights. Opioid drug overdoses (prescription opioids, heroin, fentanyl, etc.) killed more than 42,000 people in 2016. That's more than any year on record. And, 40 percent of those deaths involved prescription opioids. Veterans are also at high risk for opioid overuse. The Veterans Health Administration has introduced the Opioid Safety Initiative to identify at-risk Veterans and develop an action plan to reduce risks for overdoses. As part of this initiative, researchers throughout the VA, including VISN 1, now also seek alternative ways to manage pain.

Reducing pain without meds

There are various treatment options available to VISN 1 Veterans to manage pain without drugs. This non-pharmacologic approach to pain management is called CARF, which stands for Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities.

The following are some alternative treatments for pain management. Ask your health care team about what's available at your VA location.

- Acupuncture therapy (see page 6 for more information)
- Massage therapy



- Yoga therapy
- Health coaching
- Mind-body therapy (meditation, mindfulness, etc.)
- Tai chi/Qi Gong
- Chiropractic care

Strategies might differ from clinic to clinic. At VA Connecticut, for instance, patients use a wide range of pain treatment options. These include acupuncture, deep breathing, mindfulness, meditation, healthy eating, and the anti-inflammatory diet.



Other VISN 1 pain care options

There are a wide range of treatment options throughout the VISN 1 network. Here are just some of the options for managing pain. Talk to your health care team about what's available near you.

- **Integrated Pain Clinic** — Within the primary care setting, specialists from Clinical Health Psychology, Physiatry, and Physical Therapy evaluate patients. They consult with clinicians from Pain Management, Internal Medicine, and Pharmacy.
- **Opioid Reassessment Clinic** — Specialists from Internal Medicine, Addiction Medicine, and Clinical Health Psychology run a primary care-based clinic once a week.
- **Pain Rehab School** — Veterans take part in guided exercise with the Physical Therapy team. They focus on activities that interest each patient. Veterans also participate in group-based cognitive behavioral therapy for chronic pain.
- **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Chronic Pain** — This evidence-based psychotherapy treatment aims to improve quality of life.
- **Pain School** — Program focuses on self-management techniques for chronic pain. Participants learn about a broad range of treatment and support options.
- **Complementary and Integrative Health (CIH) Offerings (e.g., iRest, qigong, tai chi)** — Talk to your health care team about what's available at your location.
- **CARF-Accredited Intensive Outpatient Pain Program** — This five-day program helps Veterans struggling with chronic pain.
- **Interdisciplinary Primary Care Pain Team** — Receive face-to-face consultation with an Interdisciplinary Clinic team.
- **Opioid Overdose Education and Naloxone Distribution (OEND) Program** — Naloxone education and prescriptions for Veterans.

STOP PAIN

Ultimately, the VA wants to help Veterans find safe and effective pain management treatments. To do this, they follow a series of best practices summed up with the acronym **STOP PAIN**.

S – STEPPED CARE MODEL:

Ongoing care that includes monitoring, self-management, and managing the condition.

T – TREATMENT ALTERNATIVES/ COMPLEMENTARY CARE:

May include evidence-based treatments like acupuncture, yoga, and progressive relaxation.

O – ONGOING MONITORING OF USAGE: Tracks and monitors individual usage of and risk of opioid therapy.

P – PRACTICE GUIDELINES: Helps providers minimize harm and increase patient safety.

P – PRESCRIPTION MONITORING: Tracks which providers are prescribing opioids to patients.

A – ACADEMIC DETAILING: Teaches front-line providers about alternative options, resources, and opioid safety.

I – INFORMED CONSENT FOR PATIENTS: Provides education on the risks of opioid therapy.

N – NALOXONE DISTRIBUTION: The Opioid Overdose Education & Naloxone Distribution (OEND) program educates providers on Naloxone distribution to Veterans on long-term opioid therapy.

Learn more about VA's pain management efforts at www.va.gov/painmanagement.

Ancient Remedy Brings Pain Relief to Veterans

Veterans who suffer from chronic pain now have a new option for temporary pain relief. VA New England Healthcare System doctors have begun using Battlefield Acupuncture, a form of ear acupuncture, to help ease debilitating pain.

Dr. Daniel Federman from VA Connecticut uses acupuncture on his patients, and is pleased to see how well it reduces pain. He assesses his patient's level of pain before, during and after treatment. He says acupuncture reduces pain better, as compared to traditional medications. "About 88% of Battlefield Acupuncture patients experience a decrease in their pain immediately," said Federman.

Military doctor, Richard Niemtzw, M.D., introduced acupuncture in 2001 as a treatment on the battlefield. He realized active-duty soldiers do not always have access to Western pain medicine. The treatment combines ancient wisdom with modern technology. It can relieve joint pain, bone pain, and body pain that comes from long-term use of pain medicines.

During the procedure, a trained therapist inserts small needles along the skin of the outer ear. This stimulates specific points of the body to block pain, often in less than five minutes.



The West Haven VAMC clinic is offering Battlefield Acupuncture and the program is incredibly well-received by patients and staff. Several patients were able to reduce or wean entirely off narcotic and other medications.

Although the treatment is short-term, it allows patients to walk or do simple exercises to increase range of motion or strengthen their muscles. These exercises trigger the body's natural healing mechanism and allows the patient to heal from within. The needles fall out on their own over a short period of time.

Air Force Veteran Albert Ottaviano comes in every two weeks for Battlefield Acupuncture. He's made good progress because of it. "It's helping me get back into exercising," Ottaviano said. "Exercise is helping me bring strength back to my muscles to prevent the pain."

Battlefield Acupuncture Group Clinics are available at many VA New England medical centers.

Lorie Poulin is a primary care RN Care manager, Whole Health Champion, and a Battlefield Acupuncture point of contact. She said Veterans who don't want to take pain medicine enjoy this alternative treatment. "We've been in contact with multiple facilities within VISN 1 and other VISNs. We plan to assist others interested in adopting our successful model," she said.



Providers Who Served

Featured: Diana Santana, RN



Veteran Diana Santana, RN, arrives at Camp Bullis in San Antonio, Texas, for Mobile Aero-Medical Staging Facility (MASF) training in 2010.

Veteran Diana Santana, RN, has always wanted to serve, ever since she saw an Air Force commercial on TV when she was seven years old. On top of that, service was in her blood. Most of her family had chosen fields in public service — her brother served in the Army, her dad was a police officer, and her mom was a teacher. All it took was one small nudge and she knew she wanted to follow in her family's footsteps.

"I thought, gosh, I want to do that," Santana recalled thinking, after seeing the 1988 Air Force commercial. "I wanted to do public service and help people."

So, when it came time for her to choose her career, Santana decided to serve in the Air Force as a nurse. She treated those on

active duty from 2009 to 2013, primarily out of MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla. Santana says she loved every minute of her time in the military. Those on active duty helped her adjust to military life.

"Being with them for eight years, they became my family," said Santana. Having such a deep understanding of Veterans' struggles made it easy for Santana to decide what to do after she left the service. "I had a commander who said I should look into the VA. I know where they are coming from; I know how they feel. I realized I still wanted to keep serving the Veterans — they are our heroes."

Today, Santana serves on a team of three providers as an RN Care Manager in the Brockton VAMC and Women's Health primary care department. "We do a lot of education and working in prevention. We make sure our Veterans stay healthy, medically and physically," said Santana.

Santana has particularly enjoyed the "Whole Health" aspect of her job. It was something she first learned about in the military. Seeing the concept carried over to Veterans has been rewarding. "We take care of Veterans holistically. We help them help themselves. I really like how the VA is working with that."

Upcoming Events around VISN 1



Laconia Bike Week

June 9-17, Christie, NH,
laconiamcweek.com



Great New England Airshow

July 14-15, Westover Air Reserve
Base, Chicopee, MA,
greatnewenglandairshow.com



NASCAR

July 20-22, New Hampshire Motor
Speedway, Loudon, NH,
nhms.com

VETERANS'

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VISN 1 Communications
Department of Veterans Affairs
200 Springs Road
Bedford, MA 01730

VA MEDICAL CENTERS

CONNECTICUT

VA Connecticut Healthcare System

Newington Campus
555 Willard Avenue
Newington, CT 06111
(860) 666-6951

West Haven Campus
950 Campbell Avenue
West Haven, CT 06516
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MAINE

VA Maine Healthcare System

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Augusta, ME 04330
(207) 623-8411
(877) 421-8263

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**Edith Nourse Rogers
Memorial Veterans Hosp.**
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940 Belmont Street
Brockton, MA 02301
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Jamaica Plain Campus
150 S. Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02130
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1400 VFW Parkway
West Roxbury, MA 02132
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(413) 584-4040

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Stamford, CT 06905
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Waterbury, CT 06706
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Willimantic CBOC
1320 Main Street
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Social Security Office)
Willimantic, CT 06226
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Winsted CBOC
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Winsted, CT 06098
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MAINE

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(207) 403-2000

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50 Union Street
Calais, ME 04619
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163 Van Buren Road, Ste. 6
Caribou, ME 04736
(207) 493-3800

Fort Kent CBOC
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Fort Kent, ME 04743
(207) 834-1572

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20 Hartford Street
Houlton, ME 04730
(877) 421-8263, ext. 2000

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Springfield, MA 01104
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Worcester, MA 01605
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Keene, NH 03431
(603) 358-4900

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Littleton, NH 03561
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Somersworth, NH 03878
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Tilton, NH 03276
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Middletown CBOC

One Corporate Place
Middletown, RI 02842
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Bennington, VT 05201
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