

VETERANS'

healthy living

**Life for Veterans
with SCI**

**NEW WAYS TO BEAT
CHRONIC PAIN**

**BETTER TREATMENTS
for Hepatitis C**

**A Proper Welcome for
Vietnam Veterans**



**VA
HEALTH
CARE**

Defining
EXCELLENCE
in the 21st Century



A Message from the Network Director

Michael Mayo-Smith, MD, MPH
Network Director

Dear Veterans,

Summer is in full bloom here in beautiful New England, but the sun isn't the only bright spot for VA Health Care and our VISN 1 Veterans. We have plenty of exciting updates to give you about some of the programs and services that are available to you to help you lead the healthiest life possible.

The treatment that our Vietnam Veterans received when they came home 50 years ago still haunts all of us. Our VA team here in VISN 1 and across the country decided it was time to make things right. So, many of our health centers have hosted special "Welcome Home" events to honor and pay homage to these amazing men and women who sacrificed so much for us. Get a closer look at a few of the amazing moments shared by VA Manchester on page 3.

For Veterans with spinal cord injuries, what we consider "normal" daily activities can be a tremendous challenge. But at the Spinal Cord Injury Unit at Brockton/VA Boston, Veterans are leading full, active lives with the help of some innovative and compassionate caregivers. Check out their story on page 5.

The VA is always looking for newer and better ways to help Veterans manage their unique health issues. Get some important information about what VISN 1 is doing for Veterans with chronic pain (page 4) and hepatitis C (page 6).

Finally, on page 7, get an inside look at the VA Biorepository Brain Bank and the people who are passionate about medical research that will benefit our Veterans - and all Americans - now and in the coming years.

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

Michael Mayo-Smith, MD, MPH
Network Director



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Maureen Heard
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WEBSITE: www.newengland.va.gov

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ON THE COVER:

Larry Berry shoots air rifles with specialty adaptive equipment as part of his SCI treatment.



VA MISSION:

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

Innovative new ways to manage pain

Our nation's Veterans face unique health challenges. The emotional and physical aftereffects of military service and battle result in higher rates of PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and more. And, the physical demands and injuries from battle also result in a common and debilitating problem: chronic pain.

Over the years, many Veterans have been given prescription pain relievers such as morphine, codeine, hydrocodone, methadone, and other opioid medications. But research has shown that Veterans are twice as likely than non-Veterans to have an accidental overdose and more likely to have other negative outcomes, especially if they also have PTSD.

"Opioid pain medications can be extremely addictive and carry a high risk of dangerous side effects and even fatal overdose," says Tu Ngo, PhD, MPH, VISN 1

Pain Council Co-Chair. "We want to help Veterans find safer ways to manage pain so they can minimize or even eliminate the need for opioids."

VISN 1 designated pain management as a strategic initiative and is seeing positive results from these efforts.

"Our VISN now has the second lowest rate of opioid prescriptions in the country" Dr. Ngo says. "As we consider safer use of opioids we are focusing on different treatment options. We are shifting the conversation from chasing the pain intensity rating solely to promoting functioning and quality of life. Many facilities are offering innovative treatments for managing pain. For instance, many of our physicians are trained in an acupuncture technique known as battlefield acupuncture that has been successful in treating pain for many Veterans."



Today, several VA facilities offer the following services for pain management - and more plan to offer these services in the near future as part of the VISN strategic initiative:

- Acupuncture
- Chiropractic care
- Mindfulness meditation
- Cognitive behavioral therapy for chronic pain
- Pain school
- Yoga, tai chi, reiki, qi gong
- Physical, occupational, and recreational therapy

Veterans with chronic pain or who may have dependence on opioid pain medication are encouraged to see their VA health care provider for assistance.

One Veteran's pain story



Ron Sabatino was dealing with constant pain when he completed his duty in 1985. He had a broken ankle that hadn't been repaired correctly and a back injury. For years, he relied upon his prescription pain medication to help him get through the day - and even then, he was not getting the relief he needed.

But since he began treatment at the Pain Program at the Bedford VAMC, he's swimming three times a week, doing yoga, meditating, and feeling better than ever. He's also significantly lowered his dose of pain medication.

"These activities help me with my pain every day," Sabatino says. "They've even helped me manage my PTSD. I give all the credit to the people at the VA. I feel very blessed that I've had the help of the VA staff. They really care about the Veterans and their families."

A better life for **VETERANS WITH SCI**

Veterans at the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Unit at Brockton/VA Boston are challenging what it means to be living with a spinal cord injury. In fact, one look at their list of activities may leave you wondering how these Veterans could be injured at all.

“We are very busy in the SCI unit,” says Joan Lynch, Recreation Specialist. “Our Veterans play bocce, adaptive bowling, cribbage, practice archery and shooting, and go swimming.”

“Joan does great work with our Veterans in the long-term care spinal cord injury unit,” says Sunil Sabharwal, MD, Network SCI Service Line Director, VISN 1 and SCI Chief, VA Boston Health Care System. “Veterans on that unit report a significantly higher quality of life, on average, compared to others living with SCI in the community and those followed in the private sector. Activities such as these are a big contributing factor for that.”

It’s that quality of life that is so important to Veterans who are living with SCI. Dr. Sabharwal says Veterans at the SCI Unit participate in everyday, normal activities and have a say in their daily schedule, activities, and even the physical space. Being part of a community, having social interaction, and having some control over their environment helps them to overcome many of the challenges that a spinal cord injury may cause.



“Veterans have incredible resilience, and we have a supportive environment for them,” Dr. Sabharwal adds. “I’m a big advocate for activities. They add so much value without much cost. It’s a perfect example of successful treatment that isn’t just about the latest technology or medical breakthroughs. It’s about improving our Veterans’ lives as a whole.”



Above photos: Veterans Frank Williams and Larry King play bocce ball at the gym at Brockton/VA Boston.

New, better treatments for hepatitis C

It's a severe, potentially life-threatening liver infection that has a particularly high incidence in our Veteran population. And, many Veterans don't even know they have it.

It's Hepatitis C, and it often has no symptoms, allowing it to go undetected for many years. By then, irreversible damage to the liver may be done. Left untreated, it can lead to liver failure, liver cancer, and even death.

Past problems with treating hepatitis C

Treatment for this serious disease has been met with a number of obstacles in the past. Getting patients to the doctor to get tested is one issue, especially if the person has no symptoms. But, perhaps more important, the older hepatitis C treatments had a number of severe side effects that were difficult for many to live with. In addition, the medications had to be taken for a year. And for those who completed treatment, a cure wasn't guaranteed, and often didn't happen. These problems led to an epidemic of hepatitis C patients who either didn't want to get tested or, even if they did, couldn't tolerate the treatment.



(L) Michelle Baytarian, PA-C, MMSc, Liver Clinic Coordinator, Lead Hepatitis C Clinician, Lead Physician Assistant, discusses the latest medication in the VA Boston pharmacy with Tony Houranieh, RPh, MS, PhD, Associate Chief of Pharmacy, Clinical Services Co-Chair, VA Boston IRB and Rayhme Collins, PA, GI Service.

New treatments today

Fortunately, huge strides have been made in hepatitis C treatment - and the newest treatment modalities are offered in VISN 1. The VA now has access to state-of-the-art medications that have a low rate of side effects and only need to be taken for 12 weeks for a majority of patients. And perhaps the best part: they're extremely effective, with a high cure rate for many patients.

What you can do

Testing is voluntary, and is done through a simple blood test. Talk with your doctor about your risk factors.

"There's an estimated 6,000 Veterans have hepatitis C in VISN 1," says Michelle Baytarian, PA-C, MMSc, Lead Hepatitis C Clinician,

VA Boston HCS. "We've treated 30 percent of them in the last three years with these new regimens, and plan on continuing treating until every possible treatment candidate has been cured."

"We have the best hepatitis C treatments available to our Veterans today - and we are striving for a 100 percent cure rate," adds Tony Houranieh, RPh, MS, PhD, Associate Chief of Pharmacy for Clinical Services at VA Boston. "We want Veterans to know that we have the cutting edge resources to successfully treat them, and they're totally different from the drugs used even just five years ago. Veterans need to take the first step by going to their doctor and discussing the screening. If you get screened, you can get treated - and ultimately, get cured."

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

VA MEDICAL CENTERS

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