FOCUS VA

RALPH H. JOHNSON MEDICAL CENTER

www.charleston.va.gov

Winter 2012

Human Performance Lab - *Learning How Stroke Patients Move*

Veteran & Family Centered facilities open at VA

REAPing the benefits of VA research

director's letter

As we begin 2012 it is important to take a moment to reflect on last year's accomplishments at the VA, in our nation, and across the world. At the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center we had a banner year meeting 96 percent of the measures used to evaluate VA facility performance, which is proof that you are receiving the best care at one of the top VA's in the country. I am especially proud that 98 percent of our patients in need of mental health care are receiving their appointments within 14 days. Our Veterans can truly rest assured they are receiving the right care at the right time.

There are many things we could celebrate in 2011, but none is greater than the end of the war in Iraq. For several years VA has prepared to welcome home our troops and help them transition to Veteran status and civilian life. At our VA we have increased staffing to meet their needs while maintaining continuity of care and services for Veterans of all ages. We have opened new facilities to accommodate patient growth and are delivering care in newer ways such as through tele-medicine to improve access and convenience for our Veterans.

We have accomplished a lot, but there is more to do. Our focus in 2012 will continue along the path of discovering new treatments to improve Veteran health, building an environment that meets family and patient needs, providing for our growing women Veteran population, and expanding access for all Veterans. In this issue of Focus VA you will discover how VA Research propels Veteran health forward, get a glimpse of our new Patient Family Lounge, and learn more about our Mental Health expansion. It's going to be an exciting year full of challenge and opportunities, and we look forward to achieving great things to better serve and care for you our nation's heroes.

Scott R. Isaacks

Scott Isaacks
Acting Director

on the cover

At the Human Performance Lab, VA Researchers study how stroke patients move to better understand what therapies will improve their mobility. Photo by Kevin S. Abel.

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VA news

4 VA OPENS NEW PATIENT FAMILY LOUNGE
Charleston VAMC adds family lounge as hallmark to Patient and Family Centered Care initiatives.

5 VETERAN ENRICHMENT CENTER OPENS
Veteran Enrichment Center (VEC) provides counseling and treatment for patients with long-term mental illness in a Veteran-friendly environment.

to your **health**

6 COLLABORATION KEY TO VA RESEARCH
Multi-disciplinary research teams gain better understanding of disease and discover new treatment methods for improved health outcomes.

8 RESEARCHER ENGINEERS DRIVE TO DEVELOP STROKE THERAPIES
Researcher strives to develop stroke therapies "toolbox" to give clinicians proven therapies that yield results.

10 VETERANS REAP THE BENEFITS OF RESEARCH
Charleston Research Enhancement Award Programs (REAP) finding ways to eliminate health disparities among rural, ethnic and different age groups of Veterans.

11 COPPER TOUCH SURFACES PROVEN TO LOWER INFECTIONS
Copper surfaces cut the amount of bacteria in hospital ICU rooms by 97 percent and reduce hospital acquired infections rates by 41 percent.

veteran to **veteran**

12 STAND DOWN AGAINST HOMELESSNESS
The 12th annual Stand Down Against Homelessness helped over 2,000 homeless and persons in need in the Lowcountry.

around **the lowcountry**

14 CHARLESTON CELEBRATES VETERANS DAY WITH PARADE
Veterans Day Parade honors our nation's heroes.

VA OPENS NEW PATIENT FAMILY LOUNGE

Patient Family Lounge offers comfortable atmosphere, children's play area and mothers' room for loved ones at Charleston VAMC.

By Tonya C. Lobbestael, Public Affairs Officer

Photos by Kevin S. Abel

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center's new Patient Family Lounge opened its doors on Nov. 15 receiving high praise from Veterans and their loved ones for its family friendly environment. The $350,000 project, funded through a VA Patient Family Centered Care (PFCC) grant, is a hallmark for the Medical Center's PFCC initiatives.

The lounge brings a host of new features designed around a soothing aquatic theme to families who need to be near their Veteran loved one. The area includes comfortable seating, computers with internet access and touch screen games to entertain children, a small kitchenette, TV, and a children play area. Additional amenities include a family bathroom and a mothers nursing room.

Several Veterans, family members, staff and volunteers attended the grand opening to get a first look at the facility. Veteran Jason Kates who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, remarked that the lounge is exactly what Veteran families need as he watched his toddler son color pictures on the computer.

Veterans Service Organizations have partnered with the VAMC to make sure families have a first-class environment too. The Veteran Support Organization sponsors a coffee service for guests in the lounge, and donations have been provided from several other VSO's and community groups.

Interactive computers are just one of the many amenities for Veteran families in new lounge.

"We understand that when one family member serves, they all serve," said Acting Director Scott Isaacks. "And when one family member becomes a Veteran we have a responsibility to provide an environment that helps heal the Veteran and involves his or her family in that care."

Veterans Enrichment Center Opens

Mental Health expansion proven strategy for seeing 98 percent of Veterans within 14 days

Ribbon cutting with Stephen Lucas, Donald L. "Hugh" Myrick, Scott R. Isaacks, and Lt. Col. Edward P. Chamberlayne at the Veterans Enrichment Center grand opening.

By Kevin S. Abel, Public Affairs Specialist

Photos By Chris Baroody

Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center opened its new Veterans Enrichment Center on Dec. 5, 2011, adding new classrooms, group therapy space and clinical offices to meet the growing demands for care at one of the nation's best VA mental health programs.

The VEC is a psychosocial rehabilitation center that provides Veterans living with long-term mental illness counseling and treatment in a Veteran-friendly environment. This expansion is considered key to the strategy to ensure the facility maintains its outstanding 98 percent access for mental health patients receiving care within 14 days, according to Associate Chief of Staff, Mental Health Hugh Myrick, MD. The medical center has aggressively prepared over the past five years to meet the increased demand for mental health care for returning combat Veterans, while maintaining continuity of care for Veterans of other eras added Myrick. Since 2006 the VAMC has expanded its mental health staff from 71 to 190 clinicians and support personnel to meet the needs of the growing Veteran population. In the past five years Mental Health has increased the number of patients it cares for from 13 to 25 percent, which equals over 13,000 of the facility's 55,000 patients.

"The VA is the expert on mental health care for our nation's heroes," said VA Medical Center Acting Director Scott Isaacks. "We are proud of the fact that we are making sure our Veterans receive the care they need when they need it, and we will continue to put our resources behind caring for their mental and physical well-being."

The breadth of mental health services have also increased in recent years. Telemental health for specialized PTSD care is now provided from Charleston to Veterans throughout South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama. The Homeless Program has placed more than 200 Veterans in permanent housing through the Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supported Housing (HUD-VASH) voucher system. A Suicide Prevention Coordinator has been added and general Mental Health and Substance Abuse Treatment programs have expanded.

"Simply put, we have one of the very best mental health teams caring for our Veterans and participating in cutting edge research like virtual reality and transcranial magnetic stimulation here," said Isaacks. "The Veterans Enrichment Center will add even more to one of the best mental health programs in the Department of Veterans Affairs."

Collaboration

key to VA research

Collaboration has always been important to research efforts in the VA. But in Charleston, where VA researchers work side by side with researchers from the Medical University of South Carolina, that collaboration is taken to a new level bringing specialists from varied backgrounds together to discover new methods for providing the best care anywhere for our nation's Veterans.

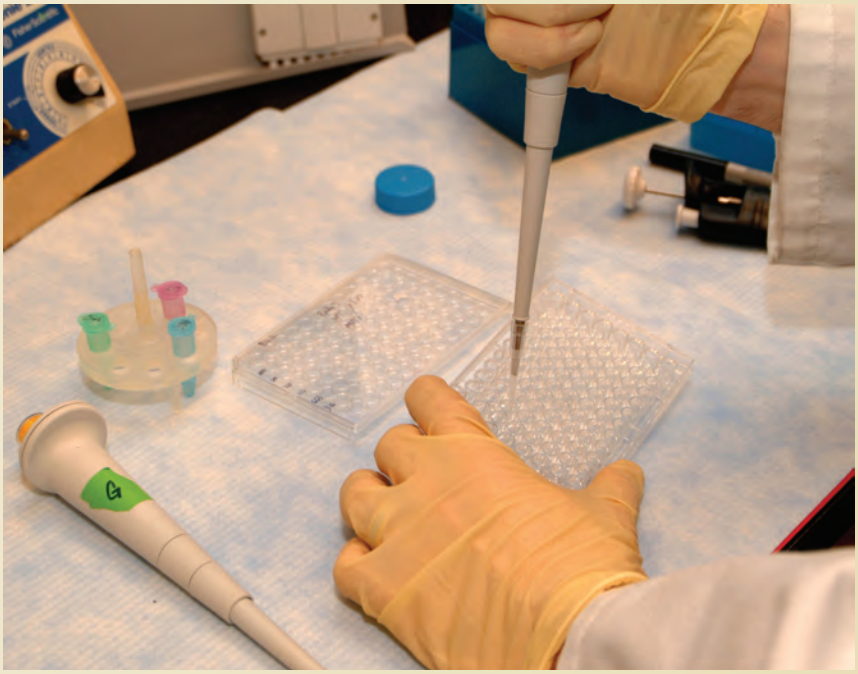
At the Charleston VA there are more than 60 research investigators involved in over 170 research projects on health problems ranging from endocrinology to telemental health to stroke rehabilitation. The Charleston VAMC research program was one of the first research programs in the country to successfully achieve accreditation for its Human Subjects Protection Program, and it is one of the most highly respected programs comprised of world-renowned researchers who have received numerous awards for excellence from such organizations as the American Physiological Association, the American Diabetes Association and the National Institutes of Health.

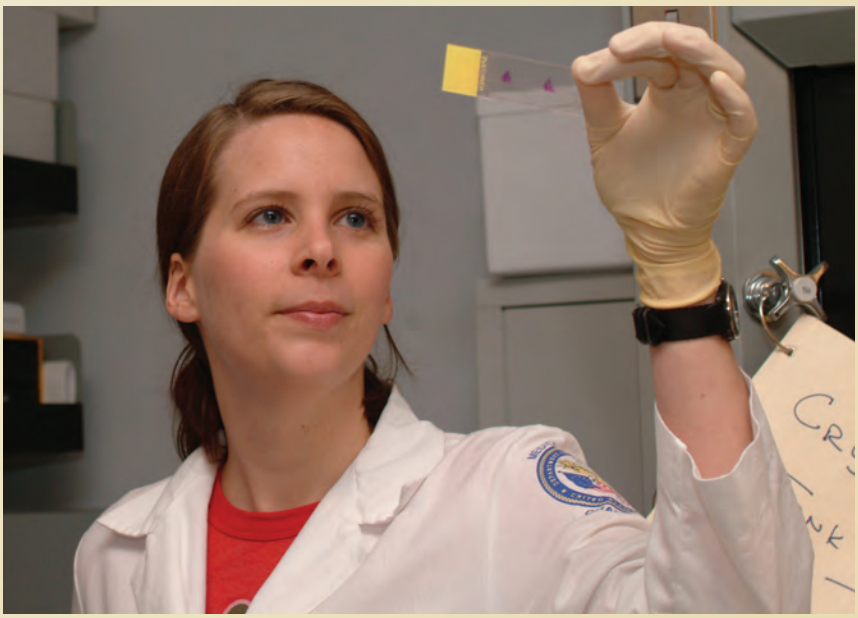
With more than 40 ongoing clinical trials in such areas as cardiac arrhythmias, congestive heart failure, lipoprotein metabolism in diabetes, and understanding the role of signaling pathways in stroke and spinal cord injury the VAMC's research program includes clinicians, therapists, engineers, and scientists working together to understand complex health issues and find the best ways to treat them.

"To effectively and successfully conduct biomedical research today requires a multidisciplinary approach. One scientist cannot know it all or do it all," explained VA Research Health Scientist Richard L. Klein, Ph.D. who is a principal investigator for endocrinology research. "The investigators in our group complement one another and the collective sum is stronger than the individual parts."

The same holds true across the VA and with other entities that VA collaborates with for research studies. Charleston VA Principal Investigator Joseph John, MD recently completed a study on the use of copper touch surfaces in medical centers to reduce hospital acquired infections in partnership with Sloan Kettering Hospital, MUSC, and the Copper Development Authority (see story on page 11). And in Dr. Steven Kautz's lab you'll find a biomedical engineer working with physical and occupational therapists to develop a "toolbox" of proven interventions to help stroke victims walk (see story on page 8).

It is this type of collaboration that continues to propel research at Charleston VAMC and at VA's across the country to discover and utilize evidence-based practices that improve the health of Veterans everywhere.





VA Research
Accomplishments

The Department of Veterans Affairs conducted its first hospital-based medical studies establishing VA's research program in 1925. Groundbreaking discoveries that have improved the health and well-being of America's Veterans and general population have been realized through the years.

1928
Reported findings on long-term health effects of chemical warfare.

1958
Contributed to the development and early use of the implantable cardiac pacemaker.

1968
Performed the first successful liver transplants.

1970
Landmark VA Cooperative Study on hypertension, showing drug treatment was effective in controlling blood pressure and reducing the incidence of major cardiovascular events.

1984
Developed the nicotine patch.

1991
Developed Functional Electrical Stimulation (FES) systems that allow patients to move paralyzed limbs.

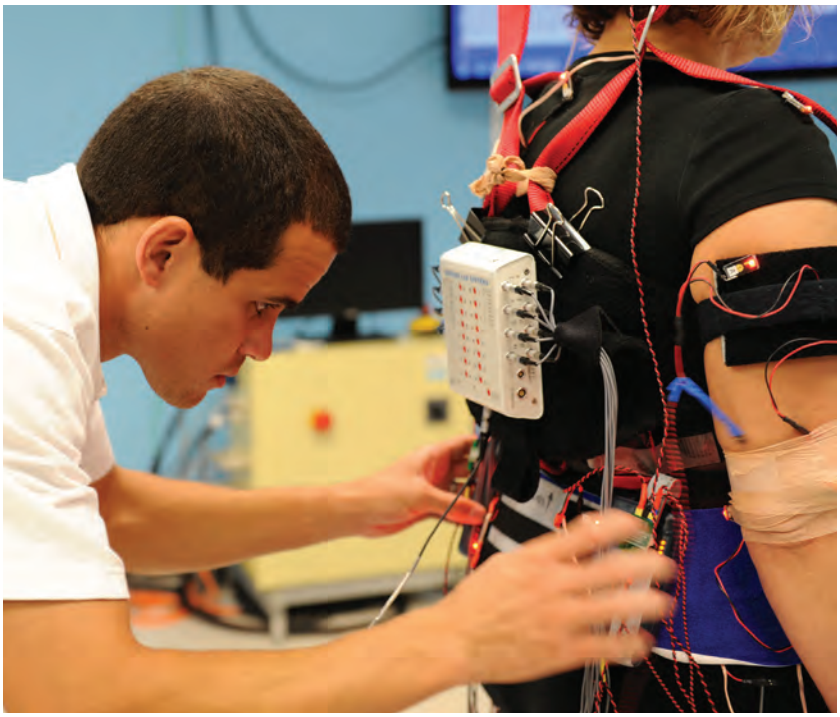
1994
Demonstrated that one aspirin a day reduced by half the rate of death and nonfatal heart attacks in patients with unstable angina.

2005
Showed the effectiveness of a new vaccine for shingles.

2010
Identified a potential biomarker for PTSD through the use of a super-fast scanner that captures cross talk between groups of neurons in the brain.

Researcher

Research Associate Jenna Nott and Physical Therapist Aaron Embry get stroke patient Lucille Caddin ready for testing in the motion lab.



Physical Therapist Aaron Embry checks the sensor during setup in the motion lab. The sensors give detailed data on how patients move while walking to help researchers understand what interventions will be most beneficial for improving movement.

By Tonya C. Lobbestael, Public Affairs Officer

When Steven Kautz went college he planned to major in geophysics and work for a major oil company. But that all changed when he discovered his passion for research and understanding how the human body moves.

Kautz, who laughs that he loves research but not in geophysics, began studying the biomechanics of pedaling in elite cyclists earning his Ph.D. as a Biomedical Engineer in Neuroscience – Dynamics/Controls with a goal of translating his field of study into therapies for stroke victims.

He began his 19-year VA career at the Palo Alto VA Rehabilitation Research and Development Center – one of the original R&D Centers of Excellence – studying how one leg's movement influences the other leg. From there Kautz went to the Gainesville VA and University of Florida to work in the VA Brain Rehabilitation Research Center of Excellence. Today he is a Research Career Scientist with the Charleston VA and Chair of the Medical University of South Carolina's Department of Health Sciences and Research overseeing the human performance lab. There he is continuing his work to understand quantitatively how people move in order to provide proven treatment options to clinicians to help stroke victims regain as much movement as possible.

"We're in the buckle of the stroke belt," Kautz explained when discussing the magnitude of the work done in the human performance lab. Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the United States with 137,000 deaths according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control reports this state consistently ranked first or second from 1983 to 2004 for highest mortality rate in the country due to stroke. Stroke remains the third leading cause of death in South Carolina resulting in 2,460 deaths in 2007. With thousands more living with the effects of a stroke, Kautz and his team's research is even more important.

The goal is to give clinicians a better theoretical framework to understand what happened because of the stroke, and a therapies and measurements toolbox related to that framework of proven interventions that yield results for improving various movement deficiencies in stroke victims.

Sound complicated? It is.

Engineers

drive to develop stroke therapies toolbox

Photos By Kevin S. Abel

"We really don't have good enough measures of how people move and what might be wrong," said Kautz. "In stroke if you need to walk better they (therapists) will be doing multiple things but there is no proven system of therapies that will work. There is no detailed data on knowing why an improvement occurs."

But Kautz plans to change that. He breaks his research down this way.

The first goal is to understand how the underlying systems that control movement are affected by the stroke. These systems include the spinal cord that is more like a computer than a wire coming down from the brain, according to Kautz.

"When you're walking you need the right activation descending from the brain to the spinal cord where the neurons that control walking are located," he explained. Stroke research participants normally have full behavioral measurements taken in the human performance lab to get a baseline. Measurements include how limbs move, force applied, muscle groups used independently, and metabolism measures.

Then interventions such as the amount of support provided by the harness, speed of the treadmill, or assistance moving the limb are applied to get the patient to practice proper movement with the therapist. Once the "best" movement is found variables are introduced to see what makes that movement possible. Detailed engineering analysis is then conducted to understand effectiveness of intervention or treatment options.

Kautz says the primary focus of the research is to get stroke rehabilitation tools in the clinicians' hands.

"It's been great for me (as an engineer) to be in a place where most of my counterparts are clinical," he said. He appreciates the perspectives that the physical and occupational therapists who work in the lab with him bring to the investigations.

They are now working to establish a clinical integration group made up of therapists from the VA and community hospitals to present the research to them and then learn what other questions the therapists need answered to treat their patients.

In the future, Kautz and his team hope to see the human performance lab become a VA Center of Excellence for stroke research.

Research Scientist Dr. Steven Kautz brings engineering-style analysis to the motion lab to more clearly define effects of stroke in individual patients and develop proven treatment tools to improve movement.

> "In stroke if you need to walk better they (therapists) will be doing multiple things but there is no proven system of therapies that will work. There is no detailed data on knowing why an improvement occurs."

VETERANS

REAP the Benefits of Research

By Laura Lythgoe, Public Affairs Specialist

Charleston VA's Center for Disease Prevention and Health Interventions for Diverse Populations is focused on one thing – finding ways to eliminate health disparities among different Veteran groups. With more than 20 investigators this Research Enhancement Award Programs, or REAP, center has brought together specialists who are researching differences in health and healthcare outcomes amongst Veterans of different races, ethnic groups, ages, genders, geographical areas and socio-economic status.

REAP Director Leonard Egede, MD, who came to the Charleston VA in 2004 to build this program, says his recent studies have focused on quality of care differences between races with an emphasis on diabetes patients and rural telehealth care for elderly Veterans. Other research projects include: innovative service delivery for secondary prevention of PTSD in at-risk OEF/OIF Service members; telepsychology service delivery for depressed elderly Veterans; ethnic differences in medication adherence and cost for elderly Veterans with diabetes mellitus; and racial variations in communication, decision making, and diabetes outcomes.

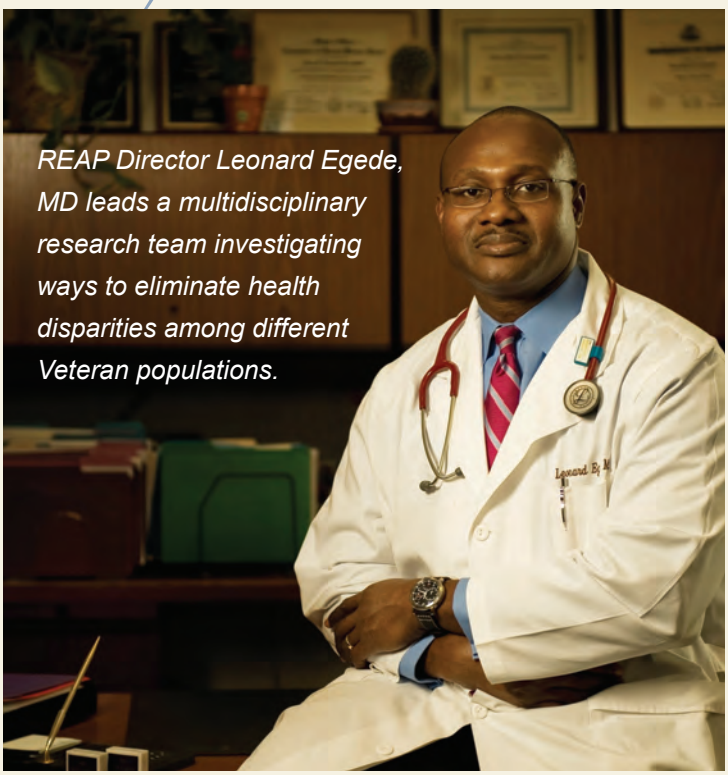
Egede and Sharon Pope, Ph.D. are conducting the racial variations in communication study with hopes of understanding if communication between the patient and provider varies based on ethnic background, and if that translates into an explanation of the differences in health of these patients.

"When you have good communication, patients feel better and they tend to be more likely to do what you've asked them to do," Egede explained.

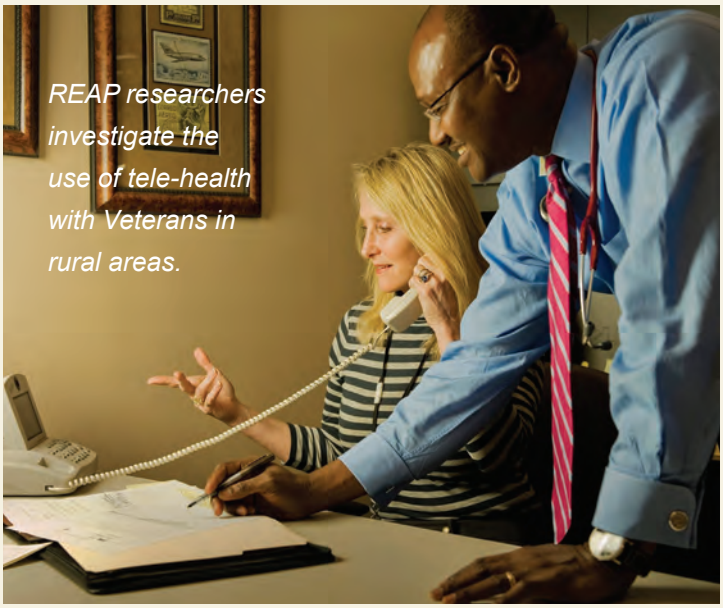
The telepsychology study is investigating whether mental health care provided via video conferencing benefits patients the same way or possibly better than a face-to-face visit. In this study, Mental Health providers carried smart phones, enabling them to speak to and see their patients, even though they were geographically separated while another group of patients was seen in person. Results are now being analyzed, but Egede said one benefit is the provider's ability to see the patients where they are most comfortable, possibly leading to a more honest reaction during a session.

Egede sees other potential benefits, adding "… if a patient is suicidal and they leave your office, you have no way of tracking them. But if you have them on your phone, you can get them help more quickly."

Charleston's REAP is one of 13 such VA research centers in the United States. These centers are made up of multidisciplinary groups of VA investigators studying medical issues of concern to Veterans. For information or to learn about participating in upcoming studies visit http://www.research.va.gov/resdev/programs/blrd/reap.cfm.



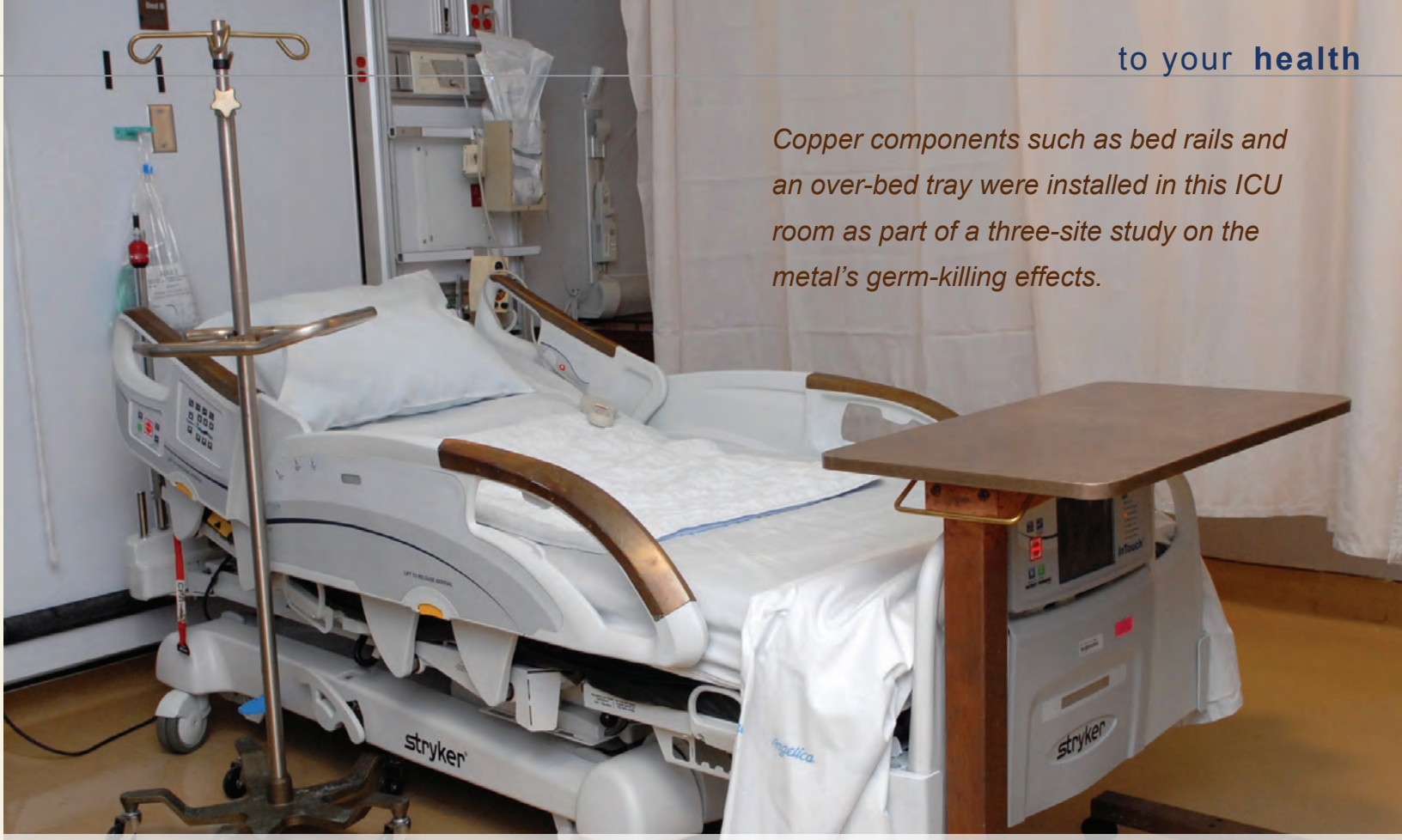
REAP Director Leonard Egede, MD leads a multidisciplinary research team investigating ways to eliminate health disparities among different Veteran populations.



REAP researchers investigate the use of tele-health with Veterans in rural areas.

Centers and Research Enhancement Award Programs (REAP)

VA's Biomedical Laboratory Research and Development (BLR & D) program supports multidisciplinary groups of VA investigators studying medical issues of concern to Veterans. Important goals of the program are to train new investigators and to promote innovative research that integrates biomedical and clinical approaches. Sites will develop a core program of investigators, statisticians, economists, and other social scientists to support and facilitate the development of BLR&D research projects and the training and mentoring of new BLR&D investigators.



Copper components such as bed rails and an over-bed tray were installed in this ICU room as part of a three-site study on the metal's germ-killing effects.

COPPER TOUCH SURFACES *Proven to Lower Infections*

By Tonya C. Lobbestael, Public Affairs Officer

Photo by Chris Baroody

A comprehensive multi-site clinical trial conducted at Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, Medical University of South Carolina, and Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York showed that the use of antimicrobial copper surfaces in intensive care unit rooms reduced the amount of bacteria in the rooms by 97 percent and resulted in a 41 percent reduction in the hospital acquired infection rate in one of the first studies to demonstrate the value of a passive infection control intervention. The results of the study, which was funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, were presented on Oct. 21 at the annual conference of the Infectious Diseases Society of America in Boston.

Hospital patients have a one in 20 chance of developing an infection, and of those who become ill, one in 20 could find their lives at risk. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that in the U.S., hospital acquired infections kill 100,000 people and cost $45 billion annually.

Objects in hospital patient rooms are a potential breeding ground for bacteria, with bacteria on ICU room surfaces being responsible for up to 80 percent of patient infections. The study results demonstrate that reducing the amount of bacteria in the patient's environment significantly lowers the risk of infection. At the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, objects such as bed rails, overbed tray tables, nurse call buttons and IV poles were replaced with antimicrobial copper versions as part of the study.

"Copper is an amazing material and we are creating new applications for a material the ancients knew as very special," said VA Principal Investigator Joseph John, MD. John, who is also a Fellow of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, the conference where the initial findings were presented in October in Boston, hopes to see copper touch surfaces expanded in clinical settings.

Independent laboratory testing has demonstrated that when cleaned regularly, antimicrobial copper products kill greater than 99.9% of the following bacteria within two hours of exposure: MRSA, VRE, Staphylococcus aureus, Enterobacter aerogenes, Pseudomonas aeruginosa, and E. coli O157:H7.

STAND DOWN

Against Homelessness gets Veterans off the street

By Laura Lythgoe, Public Affairs Specialist **Photos by Chris Baroody**

VA Nurse Rebecca Luehrs trims the toenails of a homeless guest at Stand Down.

Over 2,000 homeless and persons in need found the help they need at the 12th annual Stand Down Against Homelessness held in October in North Charleston. Approximately 25 percent of those attending were Veterans, and more than 40 Veterans who had not enrolled with VA for health care were identified at the event.

Stand Down, which is sponsored each year by Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and Goodwill Industries, provides clothing, dental and medical screening, flu shots, haircuts, job assistance, housing options and more for Veterans and others who need to get off the streets in the greater Charleston community. This year's event benefited from volunteers and donations provided by the U.S. Naval Consolidated Brig, Joint Base Charleston, community and Veteran Service Organizations.

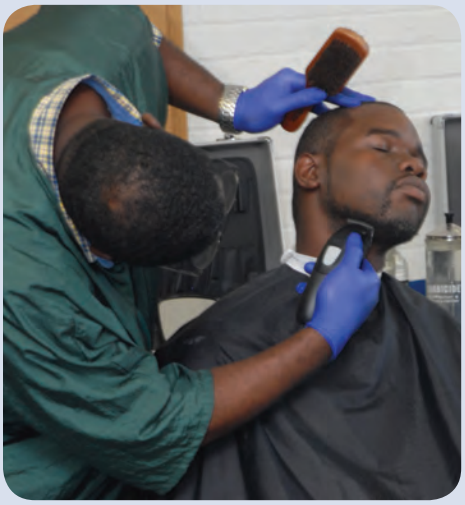
Veterans who participated received a post-deployment screening provided by the Mobile Vet Center, a voucher good for two sets of clothing from Goodwill, enrollment for VA medical benefits and information about VA programs. VA offers housing assistance programs, substance abuse programs, healthcare for homeless Veterans and the Homeless Veteran Dental Program, plus employment programs to get homeless Veterans back on their feet.

"I look forward to the day when we refer to Stand Down in past tense," said Hugh Myrick, coordinator of Stand Down and Associate Chief of Staff, Mental Health Service Line at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has a goal to end homelessness amongst Veterans by 2015. Stand Down events, which are held by every VA medical center across the country, are part of that initiative.

Myrick said the goal for next year's local event is to more heavily incorporate housing and employment services offered at the VA in hopes that people won't have to

The VA Dental team screened hundreds for oral health problems at Stand Down.



Volunteer barbers groom homeless guests at Stand Down.

come back to Stand Down again.

Former homeless Veteran Michael Myers said he didn't know where to turn when he became homeless a few years ago.

"Stand Down is a great event, because it helps spread the word when people don't know where to turn," Myers said.

Myers, who now works at the Charleston VAMC, completed the Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program as part of his road to recovery. He volunteers his personal time each year to help at Stand Down.

Information about Homeless Veterans Programs can be found at www.charleston.va.gov/HOMELESS.

VA Mental Health staff work with Veterans to meet their needs.

VA Psychologist Rachel Darrow, Ph.D. serves lunch to the homeless at Stand Down 2011.

Charleston Celebrates VETERANS DAY with Parade

Hanahan High School Army JROTC marches down East Bay St.

Disabled American Veterans District 1 members ride their float in the Veterans Day Parade.

Alvin Nelson, WWII Veteran, Former POW and grand marshal of the Veterans Day parade in downtown Charleston.

American Red Cross, Carolina Lowcountry Chapter float.

Over 70 motorcycles from Lowcountry Star, Vietnam Veterans and Buffalo Soldiers Cavalry Scouts rode in the Parade carrying flags from every state in the union.

By Sushant Jain, Administrative Fellow **Photos By Kevin S. Abel**

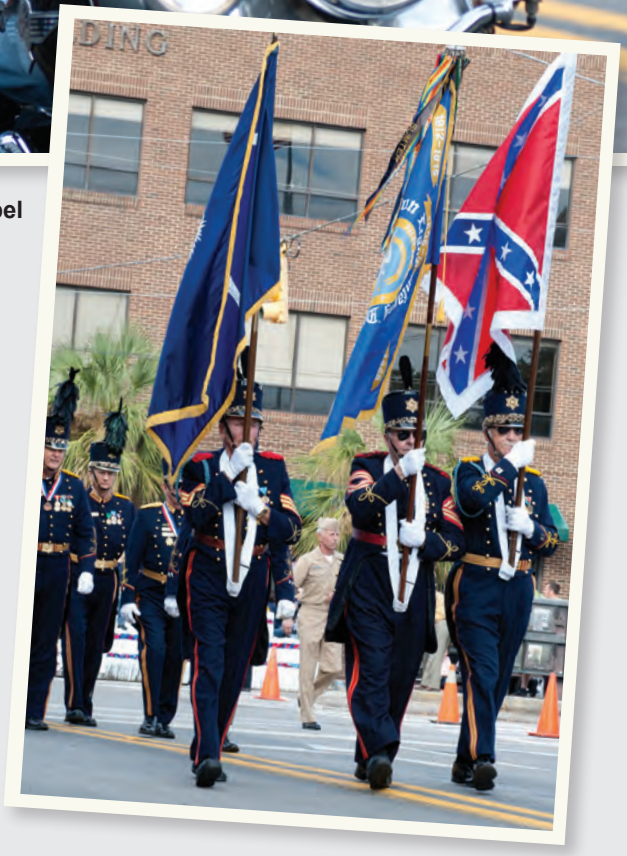
Charleston held the 2011 Veterans Day Parade on Nov. 6 in the Market District to honor and thank the Lowcountry heroes of every generation who selflessly served in our nation's military during times of peace or war.

Spectators watched as a C-17 flew over East Bay Street. Multiple marching bands, motorcycle groups, historic military vehicles and Veterans Service Organization floats were among the 100+ participants in this year's parade making it the largest Veterans Day Parade in the city's recent history. The Lowcountry Star motorcycle group led the procession carrying each state's flag and military service flags on more than 50 motorcycles.

The medical center organized a float with several employees and special guests, including the family of Spec. Allen Alexander, U.S. Army, an Operation Iraqi Freedom Veteran who passed away last March due to complications from multiple gunshot wounds suffered during combat in 2007.

The parade featured World War II Veteran and former POW Tech. Sgt Alvin L. Nelson, U.S. Army Air Corps (Ret.) as the Grand Marshal. Nelson was held prisoner at Camp STALAG 17 in Germany. Distinguished guests included Veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, and Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. The event ended with lunch sponsored by Lowcountry Star with food donated by Bojangles'.

Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center would like to thank everyone who participated in the Veterans Day Parade.



American Legion Post 147 Honor Guard represents one of many participating Veterans Service Organizations.

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Important VA Phone Numbers

Charleston VA Medical Center

843-577-5011 or toll free 1-888-878-6884 or TTY: 843-789-6888

Telephone Advice Line

843-789-6400 or toll free at 1-888-878-6884

Veterans who need medical advice from their Primary Care provider or have questions about their medications can call the TAP line Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Scheduling an Appointment

843-789-6500 or toll free at 1-888-878-6884

Veterans who need to schedule, cancel or reschedule an appointment for all Primary Care Clinics including Myrtle Beach, Savannah, Beaufort, Trident and Goose Creek can call Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Automated Prescription Refill Line

843-577-5011 or toll free at 1-888-878-6884

Veterans who need to request a refill of a prescription or check the status of refills can call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Have your social security number and prescription numbers ready when calling.

VA Benefits (other than health care)

1-800-827-1000

Veterans who need information on VA benefits including VA pension and compensation, home loans, and education can call the VA Regional Office.

Billing Questions

1-866-258-2772

Veterans who have questions about a bill received from the Charleston VA Medical Center can call the VA Revenue Center.

Suicide Prevention

1-800-273-TALK (8255) Press 1 for Veterans

Veterans can call the VA Suicide Prevention Lifeline to talk to trained professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week or visit www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

My HealtheVet

www.myhealth.va.gov

Veterans can manage their health by logging onto My HealtheVet, which offers access to Veteran health benefits and services.

For more information on VA related topics visit www.charleston.va.gov. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.