Summer 2017

my VA MAGAZINE

Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center

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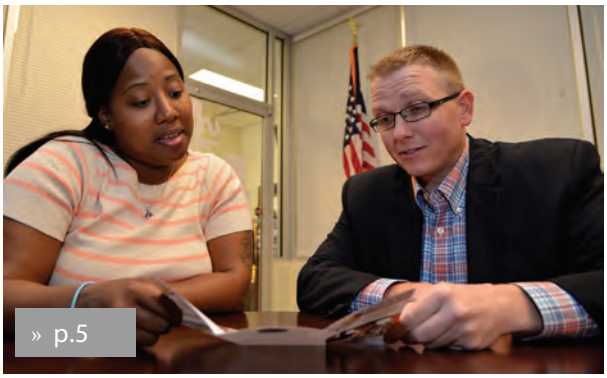
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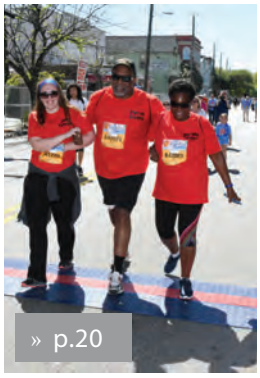
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PB 100–17–01
SUMMER 2017
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myVA Magazine is a biannual publication designed for Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center stakeholders. Its purpose is to inform, educate, entertain, and generate new ideas. An official publication, myVA Magazine is printed using appropriated funds in compliance with federal regulations.

Disclaimer: Contents of myVA Magazine are not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, the U.S. Government, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Veterans Health Administration, or the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center.

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From the Director

As the Director for the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, it is my daily honor to bear witness to the first-rate care offered at our main hospital in Charleston and our outlying community clinics. What's more impressive though, is the expert way in which our staff have adapted to our rapidly expanding patient base – consistently finding more efficient ways of operating so they can reliably provide the same compassionate, thorough care to each one of our patients. Veterans and their families continue to relocate in droves to our beautiful region, bringing with them requirements for VA services and care. Our health care system now proudly serves more than 70,000 Veterans – and that number increases each day. While we are well equipped to care for our patients now and in the future, we also realize that we cannot complete this mission alone. We rely heavily, as we always have, on our partners in the community, who share in our commitment to providing all-encompassing services to our nation's most revered – our Veterans.

We have found that we can serve our Veterans better when we are all working together through a multitude of established community partnerships. Veteran-centered organizations answer the call in so many ways, helping our Veterans live full, productive lives and supporting them through life's most difficult moments. We've featured some of these beneficial partnerships in this issue of myVA Magazine. I invite you to read about how Rein and Shine's Horses for Heroes program helped two of our Veterans heal through equine therapy, encouraging them to make meaningful connections with their fellow Veterans while learning to care for and ride horses. You can also discover how Veteran Gary Pauley, once plagued by pain from Parkinson's disease, found relief through a community fitness program called Get Excited and Move, which helped him alleviate his pain through activity. It truly takes all of us, focused on the goal of continued wellness for our Veterans, to meet the many varied needs of our unique patient population.

It's no secret that military life is tough and its experiences can leave permanent, often invisible, scars. Service members sacrifice so much of themselves when they don the uniform in defense of America's values. They're asked to leave their families behind for extended periods while they put their own lives at risk to answer the call of duty. They see and do things they may not be equipped to handle. Here at Charleston VA, we work, day in and day out, to repay the debt owed to these heroes for their sacrifices. And we strive to be increasingly vigilant and sensitive to the silent suffering of the most vulnerable among them. A staggering 20 Veterans choose to take their own lives each day in the U.S. Of those 20, 14 are not connected with VA. The mental health services and treatments available at VA are incredibly effective at intervening when a Veteran is at risk of committing suicide. But we need help. Each of us has a responsibility to be there for our Veterans and service members. Please take the time to call and check in with the Veterans in your life. Talk candidly about the struggles of military service and the difficulties of life after separation. You can make a difference. If you know a Veteran who is struggling with thoughts of suicide, encourage them to reach out to VA for care or call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), then Press 1. Together we can work to save lives, because even one Veteran death by suicide is too many.

With deepest respect and gratitude,

Scott R. Isaacks

Scott R. Isaacks, FACHE

VITAL program connects local college Veterans with VA services

By Meredith A. Hagen, Lead Public Affairs Specialist

VITAL program coordinator Charles West discuss available services with CSU student and Navy Veteran Cynthia Henderson. *(Photo by James Arrowood)*

Veterans often face a unique set of challenges when transitioning from military service to life as a college student. Fortunately, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center recently hired a full-time Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) program coordinator to assist student Veterans in accessing available VA resources designed to help them succeed in the collegiate setting.

D. Charles West, LISW-CP, is a mental health social worker and serves as the coordinator and clinical provider for the VITAL program. He brings care directly to Veteran students by meeting with them and providing certain clinical services and care coordination onsite at local college campuses.

"Having a VA representative on campus can give that center point for access to VA health care and services," West said. "We primarily offer mental health care, counseling and medication management through psychiatry, but we can also write referrals for other needed services."

West currently has a dedicated space and holds office hours at Charleston Southern University (CSU) in North Charleston. He is building affiliations with Trident Technical College, The Citadel and College of Charleston.

"I want to help people and this program helps improve Veterans' chances for success and overall quality of life."
~ Charles West

Navy Veteran Cynthia Henderson is a junior at CSU, pursuing a bachelor's degree in psychology. She was referred to West by CSU's student counseling center.

"Everything about the process is convenient," Henderson said. "It was easy to schedule a session and I was able to go in between classes, which is a whole lot better than trying to find time to get to the hospital for an appointment. And now I feel like I've been given some tools to manage stressful situations when they happen."

In addition to counseling students, West also educates college leadership and instructors about VITAL program offerings and the transitional difficulties Veterans may face when returning to school. VITAL's goal is to enhance academic retention and help student Veterans reach their educational goals.

"It's nice to know that, as a Veteran, I have help," said Henderson. "There's someone in my corner. I don't have to do this alone or suffer alone."

Charleston Fisher House

Rendering of Charleston Fisher House

By Tonya Lobbestael, Public Affairs Officer

Construction on the Charleston Fisher House has begun! Located just a mile from the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center in historic downtown Charleston, the house will be the first three-story Fisher House built in the U.S. The 16-suite home will feature a common kitchen, laundry facility, spacious dining room, and an inviting living room with a library and toys for children.

The house design, created especially to blend into the historic district, showcases the commitment of the Fisher House Foundation to bringing a Fisher House to Charleston that fits the community while providing a comfortable home-away-from-home to meet the needs of the Veterans and families who will stay there. Overall, Fisher House Foundation has built 71 Fisher Houses in the U.S. and overseas, with 31 supporting VA medical centers and 40 supporting Department of Defense medical facilities.

Fisher House Charleston, a local community organization led by Trux and Durbin Emerson, raised some $4 million to purchase and donate the lot at 150 Wentworth Street to VA for the express purpose of building a Fisher House. The Fisher House Foundation underwrites the cost of building the house, which will be donated to the VAMC once completed.

"Sometimes, the effort to build this 'home away from home' requires a little more passion and perseverance," said Ken Fisher, Chairman of the Fisher House Foundation. In the end, though, the effort is worth it. The Charleston Fisher House is expected to open and have its first guests by the end of 2017.

Rendering of Charleston VAMC front lobby renovations

Front lobby renovations

By JW Huckfeldt, Public Affairs Specialist Trainee

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center front lobby renovations are starting to take shape and construction should be completed in late November.

The vestibule features wheelchair-friendly sliding glass doors guiding Veterans and employees to an expanded lobby. The project includes adding

Expanded patient and visitor parking offered at Charleston VAMC

By Meredith A. Hagen, Lead Public Affairs Specialist

To better serve Veterans, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center opened additional patient and visitor parking in the surface lot immediately behind the medical center. Veterans may enter the facility through the West Entrance (ER Entrance) where there is convenient access to the Emergency Room and the main patient care areas, including several specialty clinics.

Charleston VAMC also offers complementary valet parking in front of the medical center Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. Off-site parking is available at 41 Folly Road, near Porter Gaud school, with a convenient shuttle service to the medical center.

For more information on parking visit http://www.charleston.va.gov/visitors/parking.asp.

Construction

approximately 1,000 sq. ft. of additional space resulting in more than 4,300 sq. ft. of total renovation space. Removing the false columns will provide functional space for movement and provide increased security with less visible obstructions. A video wall will showcase four 55-inch televisions that can operate independently or as a single unit. A boutique coffee shop and a centrally positioned information desk will also be available to those entering Charleston VAMC.

New Veterans will have access to the Welcome Center, located to the right as they enter the facility. Behind a glass wall designed to be inviting, the Transition Care Management team helps Veterans understand their benefit eligibility and enrolls them into the health care system.

The pharmacy will remain in the lobby but will be upgraded with new prescription windows and a prescription consultation desk. Veteran patients can conveniently pick up their prescriptions before leaving the facility or have questions answered by a pharmacist, if needed.

The Million Veteran Program is a voluntary research program that will help investigators better understand how genes affect Veterans' health.

Volunteer Ricky Harris reviews how to enroll in the Million Veteran Program with fellow Veteran Antonio Houston in Charleston VAMC's front lobby. *(Photo courtesy of The Post and Courier)*

Charleston VA celebrates 7,000 enrolled in genetic research study

Erin Curran, MHA, Public Affairs Specialist

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center celebrated the local enrollment of 7,000 Veterans into the Million Veteran Program (MVP) in a ceremony earlier this year. Charleston VAMC is one of 53 sites working towards the Department of Veterans Affairs' national goal of enrolling one million Veterans into the research program that will help investigators better understand how genes affect Veterans' health. Nationally, MVP has more than a half-million participants.

"Charleston was an alpha site for MVP, starting in 2011," said Charleston VAMC Associate Director Pam Crowell. "We were involved in one of the first studies that investigated the relationship between genes and cognitive function in schizophrenia and bipolar disorder."

Another early and ongoing study at Charleston VA investigates the relationship between genes and risk factors for developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Dr. Mark Hamner, lead MVP physician, remarked how heartwarming it is to see the response among Veterans who want to participate, including many hospital staff who are Veterans themselves.

"Perhaps the most common reason we hear for participation is that it helps other Veterans," said Hamner.

This tone was echoed by Veteran Ricky Harris who enrolled in MVP in 2012 and volunteers at Charleston VAMC to recruit others into the program.

"I just want to help out. In the long run it will help somebody—another Veteran," said Harris.

"It's always been of interest to me how some individuals develop PTSD after severe trauma and others don't," said Hamner. "Or why some Veterans respond to different types of treatment. Genetic differences may help explain these issues."

The voluntary research program is open to all Veterans enrolled in VA health care. Participants complete a one-time study visit (approximately 20 minutes) to provide a blood sample for genetic analysis. MVP will establish one of the largest databases of genes and health history.

In the month following Charleston's celebration, 166 additional Veterans signed-up locally for MVP—the highest month for enrollment in Charleston—and two Veterans volunteered to assist with recruitment.

Currently, women only make up about eight percent of MVP enrollees, and there is a need to increase that participation to 11 percent for study results to be statistically valid nationwide.

To enroll at Charleston VAMC, visit room DD148 located in the Mental Health Research Building by the West Entrance, Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. until 4 p.m. No appointment is necessary.

If you have any questions or would like more information, contact the MVP Information Center at 1-866-441-6075 or visit http://www.research.va.gov/mvp.

Vietnam Veteran Clinton Lanier, Jr. became the first graduate of Savannah's STAR program earlier this year. *(Photo by James Arrowood)*

Army Veteran declares victory on a 50-year battle

By Lanelle W. Strawder, MA, Public Affairs Specialist

No time like the present

Last November, Vietnam War Veteran Clinton Lanier, Jr. walked into the Savannah VA Outpatient Clinic on a mission to change the course of his life. When Lanier began using opium, heroin and marijuana while deployed to Thailand and Vietnam in the late 60s, he had no way of knowing that his once recreational use would spiral into an addiction lasting 50 years.

But late last year, everything changed for the 70-year-old.

"I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. Even a cancer diagnosis in 2007 didn't stop me," Lanier said of his drug habit. "I didn't even know what it felt like to be sober."

Lanier's decision to get clean could not have come at a more opportune time. The Substance Treatment and Recovery program, or STAR, was just taking shape at the Savannah VA clinic. Lanier was quickly accepted into the program.

STAR (previously called the Substance Abuse Treatment Clinic, or "SATC") is an intensive, outpatient substance abuse treatment program that offers assessment and individual treatment plans for Veterans struggling with addiction. Participants are required to complete a comprehensive four-week, 36-hour curriculum that teaches them the recovery skills needed to cope with addiction and how to set realistic goals. A primary goal of the program is equipping Veteran patients with the tools they'll need to manage a healthy, clean lifestyle and avoid relapses.

The STAR program has a longstanding presence at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, and also functions on a smaller scale at the Myrtle Beach and Hinesville VA clinics. Savannah's STAR program is staffed by a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, two social workers and a peer support specialist.

"I made a decision that I wanted to succeed at this thing. When I came here, I was offered the STAR program. It's helped me out a lot and it keeps me on the right track," Lanier said.

Earlier this year, the Army Veteran became the first graduate of the Savannah STAR program. He credits his success so far to encouragement from his instructors, the coping skills he's learned and the camaraderie he feels with other Veterans enrolled in the program. He's been sober for ten months and is committed to maintaining sobriety.

Lanier remembers his days of getting high, and says he was quick-tempered, and angry then. During the lonely half-century he spent hiding his habit, he avoided being around his family—always afraid they'd see who he really was.

"But now I've always got my grandchildren and great grandchildren around me. They're always there to keep me motivated and staying on the path I'm on."

Psychologist Walter Ware and Senior Social Workers Angela Taylor and Pamela Rawdon (left to right) are an integral part of a team that works together to provide care for substance use disorders. *(Photo by James Arrowood)*

Dr. James Truax, a retired Air Force flight surgeon and VA employee for 20 years, is now serving as the Chief of Cardiology for the Savannah clinic. *(Photo by James Arrowood)*

Cardiology services arrive in Savannah

By Lanelle W. Strawder, MA, Public Affairs Specialist

Heart disease is the number one cause of death in the United States, and the leading cause of hospitalizations within the VA health care system. With such prevalence among Veterans, and its association with other diseases common among Veterans (e.g., diabetes, hypertension, spinal cord injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder), leadership at the Ralph H. Johnson VAMC recognized the importance of offering cardiology services in Savannah when they began planning the Charleston VA's newest clinic.

Dr. James Truax, a retired Air Force flight surgeon, has been with VA for 20 years, serving most recently as the Chief of Cardiology at the Maine VA Medical Center. He joined the Savannah clinic in January to help establish and manage the new cardiology services being offered there. His arrival marked the first time VA has cardiology services located in Savannah.

"The Veterans are extremely appreciative and I've heard repeatedly how grateful the patients are to be able to get their care locally," says Truax. "For some of these Veterans, a cardiology appointment meant a three-hour trip to Charleston. That's a difficult trip for some patients, so I'm happy we can offer more convenient care."

Having cardiology in Savannah doesn't completely prevent Veterans from traveling to Charleston. Truax can provide routine services like heart health checks and some specialized testing. However, since he doesn't have the same resources as what's available in Charleston, more complex procedures – like heart catheterization (used to take heart measurements), electrocardioversions (shocks to the heart), pacemaker implantation and open heart surgery—must all still be performed in Charleston.

Veterans who receive care at the Hinesville and Beaufort VA outpatient clinics can look forward to shorter commutes for most of their cardiac appointments since Dr. Truax can now see them in Savannah.

Truax is also passionate about patient education and takes time speaking to Veterans about heart health.

"It's widely known that the Charleston VA provides great cardiology services," explained the board-certified cardiologist. "But being that good means you're getting lots of patients. I feel like I have a slight advantage because I'm able to spend more time with patients, helping them understand how their behaviors might be contributing to negative health outcomes."

Compared to the general population, a higher percentage of Veterans smoke and drink—activities that increase the risk for heart problems. Truax says patients can help prevent heart disease by making lifestyle changes like quitting smoking, walking a minimum of 30 minutes a day (if joints allow), and decreasing sodium intake.

Truax sees patients five days a week and looks forward to helping Veterans in Savannah and surrounding areas achieve heart health for years to come.

Marvin Manuel's 20 cancerous brain tumors are "so small you don't even know they're there." Immunotherapy medications, which he takes every three weeks, have had dramatic results in his case. *(Photo by James Arrowood)*

IMMUNOTHERAPY: Using the body to fight cancer

VA doctors use newest immunotherapy drugs to provide effective cancer treatment for Army Veteran Marvin Manual, who was diagnosed with melanoma.

By Tonya C. Lobbestael, Public Affairs Officer

Army Veteran Marvin Manuel, looked in the mirror one day in 2009 and noticed a spot on his back. The spot kept itching, and when he scratched it, the spot bled and he saw it was black. The 59-year-old former infantry soldier who lives in Beaufort, was diagnosed with melanoma at a local community hospital.

That day, he started the fight of his life.

Manuel, who had never come to the VA for health care, enrolled at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center following two surgeries at a community hospital. VA doctors removed approximately 50 lymph nodes and Manuel did well for about three years. Then, he had a seizure and a tumor the size of a golf ball, plus 19 other small tumors, were

found in his brain.

"It was like it was over right then. You hear all these stories about cancer. You go into depression, but you have to get everything done because your life is over," said Manuel.

Following surgery to remove the large tumor, his doctors tried a few different cancer medications to shrink the remaining lesions, before settling on an immunotherapy drug, Pembrolizumab, to treat his cancer more than two years ago. Manuel has an infusion of this powerful medication that triggers his own immune system to attack the cancer cells. Today, the overwhelming majority of the tumors are now "so small you don't even know they're there," says Manuel.

Immunotherapy is one of the newest, most effective ways to treat certain cancers. These medications reactivate immune cells to attack the proteins on the tumor cells, effectively sending the immune system into hyper-drive and preventing cancer cells from disguising themselves with pathways called "immune checkpoints." The body's natural immune response can then destroy the unhealthy tissues.

"The wow factor is seeing some people who had terrible disease have this dramatic response," said VA Oncologist Harry Drabkin, M.D., who says immunotherapy has been especially effective for patients with melanoma, lung, bladder or kidney cancer.

While results can be dramatic for the 20 to 25 percent of patients who respond, the drugs can cause a severe auto-immune response, leading to toxicity in the body. For Manuel, the side effects were short-lived nausea at the beginning of his treatment, which he no longer has.

"This is a new and exciting field," says Drabkin, who went on to explain that now researchers are looking for more combinations of immunotherapy drugs that will prove effective for more patients and in other types of cancers. He adds that cancer treatments must be individualized for each patient.

For Manuel, "it's a whole different ballgame today." He is back to work, and spends plenty of time camping and doing other activities with his children and grandchildren.

"We enjoy life," he says with gusto. "I'm so grateful for the VA. I want to go as far as I can go, that's all I'm asking for. I just want the VA to keep doing what they're doing—they've got good doctors, even the doctors who are learning are real good. I just want to live, and they're doing everything they can for me."

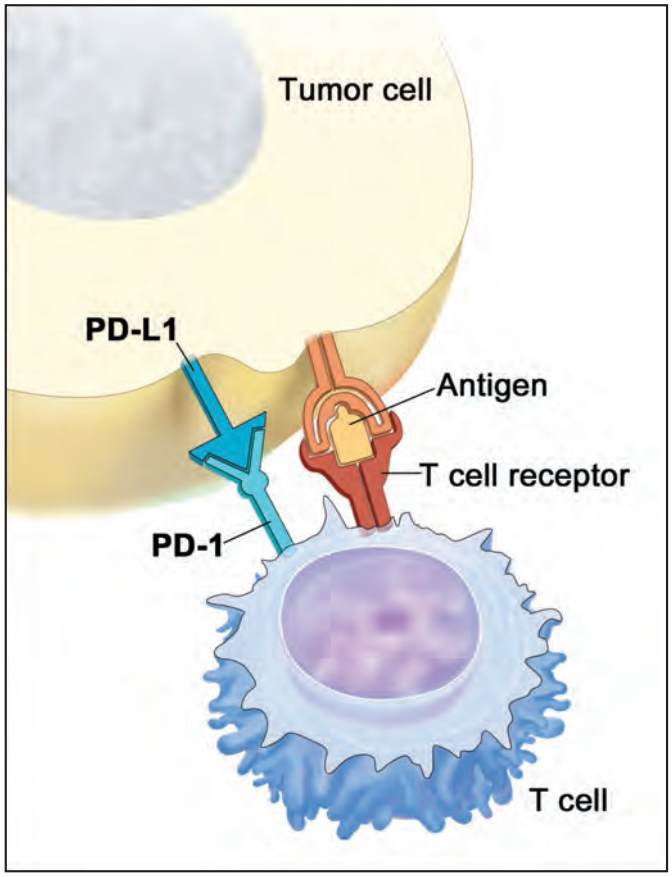


Figure 1. PD-L 1 binds to PD-1 and inhibits T cell killing of tumor cell. Copyright 2015 Terese Winslow LLC. Reprinted with permission.

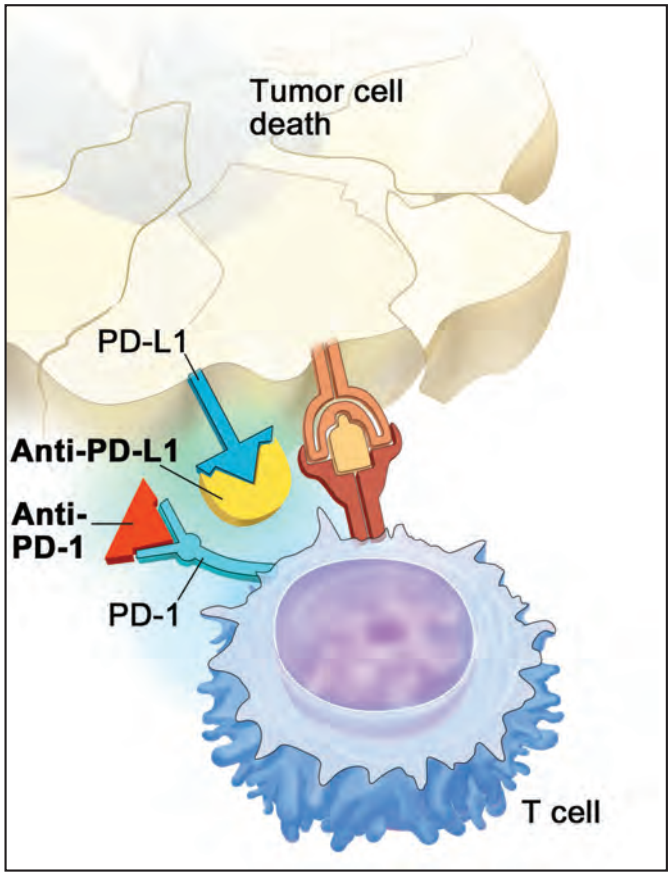


Figure 2. Blocking PD-L 1 or PD-1 allows T cell killing of tumor cell. Copyright 2015 Terese Winslow LLC. Reprinted with permission.

Charleston VAMC Controlled Substance Inspector Deborah Justice inspects the Omnicell containing the medications for 3B North, an inpatient nursing unit. *(Photo by James Arrowood)*

Strict drug inspection program helps Charleston VA stay ahead of loss and theft

By Erin Curran, MHA, Public Affairs Specialist

Earlier this year, the Associated Press reported that many VA medical centers across the country were experiencing high instances of opioid drug theft by employees. Fortunately, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center has a strict controlled substance inspection program (CSIP) in place, which helps maintain accountability of prescription medications and mitigate these sorts of issues. The program has direct oversight from Nursing Service and is monitored closely by medical center leadership.

Charleston VAMC's CSIP inspectors are medical center employees who participate as a collateral duty

with a three-year appointment that includes regularly scheduled training sessions. Inspectors are chosen by their service chief and confirmed to have no involvement with controlled substance procurement, prescribing, administration or dispensing within their regular job duties. This helps eliminate any conflict of interest for inspectors. There are currently 14 inspectors who report to the CSIP coordinator.

"For the last three years, Charleston's inspection rate averaged 99.99 percent," said CSIP Coordinator Norma Jean Cole, MBA, MSN, RN. "Our inspectors are held accountable for their monthly inspections on those units that maintain a controlled substance supply for Veteran health care needs. Their diligence in completing the drug counts and subsequent chart reviews is what has made our program a success in detecting any possibility of loss or theft. Timely inspections and strong collaborative relationships with both Pharmacy Service and VA Police allow the medical center to take any necessary action quickly."

In both 2014 and 2015, 100 percent of inspections were completed. In 2016, three of 228 inspections were missed due to human error.

"We understand how important completing each drug inspection is to maintaining the integrity of our program. We are developing new tools and trainings to ensure that inspections are not missed," said Cole.

A third-party review was conducted last summer by the DEA. The unannounced, week-long site visit reviewed Charleston VAMC procedures and protocols. Charleston's Chief of Pharmacy noted that the inspection team was pleased with the medical center's controlled substance management.

For additional oversight, pharmacy staff count inventory every 72 hours and supply areas are monitored with security cameras.

The CSIP is not new to VA and hospitals in the private sector have similar programs. However, as the use of technology rises, staffing increases, and the needs of Veterans grow with access to expanded services, it is important that controlled substance management continues with regular, routine monitoring.

Check out VA's Ask a Pharmacist App! This App enables you to access information about VA pharmacies and medication easily—with the comfort of knowing the information is valid and from trusted sources. To maximize this App's benefits, you must be a Veteran receiving VA care and have an Advanced or Premium My HealtheVet account. For more information visit https://mobile.va.gov/appstore

Need to dispose of outdated prescription pills? Mail them in! Charleston VAMC provides prepaid postage envelopes to assist Veterans with proper disposal of old and expired medications. Envelopes are available at the medical center's pharmacy window and at all VA outpatient clinics. The envelopes can also be mailed to your home—just ask your prescribing provider.

Medical Foster Home Veteran celebrates 94th birthday

By Erin Curran, MHA, Public Affairs Specialist

Gospel hymns and smiling faces filled the fellowship hall at Trinity Missionary Baptist Church recently for a surprise 94th birthday party to honor U.S. Navy Veteran Freddie Young. The celebration was arranged by his Medical Foster Home (MFH) caregiver Rose Doctor, along with members of the church.

"I didn't know they were going to have this surprise party for me," said Young. "It's a good day! I'm just happy!"

Young was living independently until 2016 when he had a fall, followed by a stay in a rehab facility to heal from his injuries. The rehab facility recommended that he not return to living alone because of his ongoing fall risk; he is also diagnosed with mild dementia. Through home-based primary care (HBPC), Young was referred to MFH, a program of certified private homes in which a trained caregiver provides services to Veterans. Because he was already being closely monitored in HBPC, Young was able to quickly be transitioned into MFH, maintaining his continuity of care. In November 2016, he was placed with Doctor.

Veteran Freddie Young celebrates his 94th birthday with caregiver Rose Doctor. *(Photo by James Arrowood)*

"It's Mr. Young's number one saying, 'I feel good,' and that changed my attitude," said Doctor during the celebration. "He always speaks in the positive. I consider him my angel and he makes my household complete."

Doctor was the first MFH caregiver in Charleston to have two Veterans placed in her home. She also cares for 77-year-old U.S. Air Force Veteran Thomas Mungin, who is blind. New state legislation passed in June 2016 allowed for this increase in in-home care capacity for MFH, dependent on the proper space available in the caregiver's home. This new provision allowed for immediate expansion of the program without having to add additional caregivers. Because of the type of care that is provided in the MFH program, the vetting process for new homes and caregivers is extensive and can take some time to get new caregivers onboard.

"At the time, we had three Veterans who were in immediate need of placement and with the new legislation, we were able to get them all into a home and cared for almost right away," said MFH Coordinator Natasha Simeon-Major. "They're like one big, happy family at Ms. Doctor's house."

During the party, one of the church deacons described Young as "a lovely, kind man who never has spoken a negative word about anyone." Other members of the church thanked Ms. Doctor for taking such good care of their beloved friend.

For more information about the Charleston VAMC Medical Foster Home program, or to refer potential caregivers or Veterans, contact program coordinator Natasha Simeon-Major, LISW-CP, at 843-789-7071.

U.S. Army Veteran Gary Pauley is now a certified level-one weightlifting coach helping others in his community with movement disorders. *(Photo by James Arrowood)*

A WEIGHT LIFTED: Parkinson's patient finds relief from pain through exercise

By Erin Curran, MHA, Public Affairs Specialist

Parkinson's disease is one of the most common neurologic disorders with symptoms that include tremors, stiffness of the body, slowness of movement and difficulty with balance. There is currently no cure and, for some, the disease can lead to severe walking difficulties, leaving them unable to live alone.

One Veteran being treated for this disease at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center is Gary Pauley of Savannah, Georgia. Pauley's diagnosis in 2009 led to persistent hip pain. Initially, he sought relief from anti-inflammatory drugs, rest and physical therapy—nothing was working.

Then, in December 2015, Pauley heard about a new community program called GEMS—Get Excited and Move—run by former Olympian and Olympic Coach Michael Cohen. The program is designed to enhance and improve muscular strength and endurance, coordination, agility, flexibility, speed work, and voice command for those with Parkinson's and other movement disorders. Pauley started as one of the initial 19 participants in the group after consulting his health care team and Charleston VAMC Pain Clinic Director Dr. Robert Friedman.

"Dr. Friedman was very frank with me and told me that it [pain relief] wouldn't happen overnight," said Pauley.

Friedman explained that patients only get about 10 to 20 percent of pain relief from opioids for chronic illnesses and that's why incorporating alternative methods is so important for pain management.

"When you get sedentary and don't move your body, you can develop pain symptoms," said Friedman. "When you train your brain to do certain movements, you are training your brain to decrease the pain."

Friedman confirmed that it takes some e time for the brain to change, so it can be a while before a Veteran sees results.

"Switching away from pain management with opioids brings about the best long-term sustained results," said Friedman. "You just have to stick with it."

Pauley started experiencing pain relief about six months after connecting with GEMS.

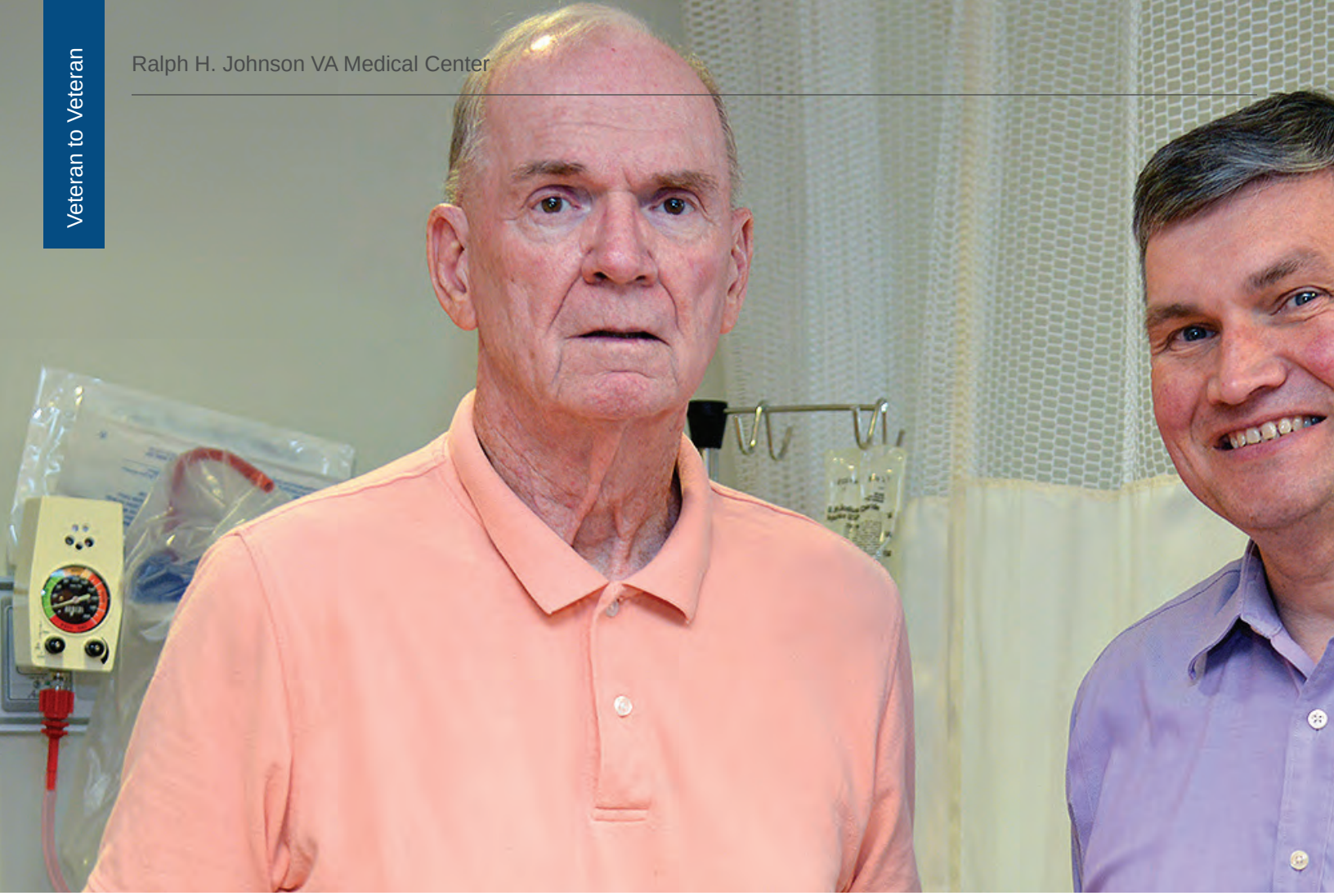
"My pain is not completely gone, but it's much more manageable now," said Pauley. "My pain level was probably at a six before, and now most days I'd say my pain is at about a one—and that's with a better quality of life and I'm not using any meds!"

Pauley believes so firmly in the program that he is now a certified level-one weightlifting coach, either leading or assisting in each of the daily classes. GEMS has grown to include 284 participants, offering 12 classes per week.

"Gary is a walking, talking example that Parkinson's doesn't have to be a debilitating disease," said Friedman.

For any Veteran looking to start an exercise routine to help relieve pain, first check with your doctor to make sure your heart is healthy enough for exercise and ensure that fall prevention precautions are taken.

GEMS classes are held in the Anderson-Cohen Weightlifting Center in Savannah, Georgia. For more information email get-excitedandmove@gmail.com or call 912-341-6953, ext. 102.



Air Force Veteran Bernard Smith (left) sought assistance from Charleston VA Chaplain John Painter (right) to heal from emotional war wounds. *(Photo by James Arrowood)*

Overcoming moral injury

Bernard Smith was accustomed to working on the flight line, helping prepare aircraft for flight into the Vietnam jungle. That is until the day he was ordered to assist the mortician. Overnight, Smith went from cleaning out planes to opening body bags.

By Takira Yager, Pathways Intern

As a young airman, Bernard Smith was used to working on the flight line, helping prepare aircraft for flight into the Vietnam jungle. That is until the day an officer at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon ordered him to assist the mortician who prepared the bodies of fallen service members for their final flight home.

Overnight, Smith went from cleaning out planes to opening body bags, often finding remains in horrifying conditions. He vividly remembers the shock of what he saw, and how unprepared he was for the assignment.

"The guys in graves and registrations were trained for this—I was not," said the now 77-year-old Smith. "When I was working on the planes, I would see the [body] bags unloaded on the flight line, but I didn't see what was inside. It got real when I was selected to support the mortuary."

In the midst of it all, he connected with the mortician he was assisting, admiring his compassion and the way he spoke to each of the deceased service members and prayed over their bodies before anything else was done.

"He would put the towel over their eyes," Smith

The Mission of the National Chaplain Center is to empower Department of Veterans Affairs chaplains in the achievement of excellence in meeting the spiritual health care needs of Veterans.

Chaplain Supportive Spiritual Care

- Grief and loss care
- Risk Screening to identify factors that may affect Veteran recovery
- Facilitation of spiritual issues related to tissue/organ donation
- Communication with Veteran caregivers
- Facilitation of staff communication
- Conflict resolution among staff members, patients and family members
- Referral and linkage to internal and external resources
- Assistance with decision making and communication
- Staff and family support

recalled, "and then he would tell them, 'Young man, you've done your time and now we're going to take care of you and get you home to your family.'"

During that time, all Smith could think about was "how many national treasures we lost." When the Air Force wanted to award him the bronze star, he turned them down because he didn't feel he deserved it, saying, "They [the deceased airmen] got a purple heart and a box to go home to their parents."

For decades, Smith was haunted by what he witnessed during his mortuary detail, but he kept quiet and slipped further and further into depression. He lived like a hermit, often having nightmares and waking in the middle of the night screaming. He struggled with alcohol abuse and broken personal relationships.

"I just did not want to talk to anyone about it," he said.

But he finally did talk about it with Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center Chaplain John Painter. Also an Air Force Veteran, Painter is leading a new effort at Charleston VA to assist Veterans with overcoming moral injury. Most often, moral injury develops when a Veteran experiences or witnesses acts during war that violate deeply held moral beliefs, which can leave Veterans struggling with their faith and experiencing inner conflict. Often, Painter explains, Veterans feel they went against their moral code or betrayed God.

Although moral injury is not classified as a mental disorder, Painter works alongside VA mental health practitioners to help Veterans overcome these issues. "As chaplains, we have always seen this," said Painter, "but the mental health community has now recognized this struggle of the spirit. It's a real philosophical grief people are dealing with."

Some Veterans with moral injury experience shame or guilt, and many Veterans are seeking forgiveness from a moral authority, according to Painter.

Therapy or sessions with chaplains vary based on the Veteran's needs. They could include casual visits, as is the case with Smith who most often jokes around with Painter when they talk, or taking confession, or even support group sessions, which are now underway at Charleston VAMC. Painter adds that religion may not even play a part in moral injury treatment efforts.

> *Even if a person is not very religious, those concepts come from a spiritual part of who they are.*
> ~Bernard Smith

"It has to do with morality and ethics," he explained. "Even if a person is not very religious, those concepts come from a spiritual part of who they are."

While Painter's visits with Smith are often laid back and full of funny quips, Painter says he sees progress being made as Smith opens up more about his experiences. "Some may see a casual conversation and not see it as treatment," said Painter, "but some can only talk in humor."

And as the saying goes, laughter is sometimes the best medicine.

Natalie Caula and Tonya Lobbestael contributed to this story.

VA physical therapist uses Cooper River Bridge Run to motivate Veteran's recovery

By Meredith A. Hagen, Lead Public Affairs Specialist

For the second year in a row, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center Physical Therapist Janine Tumminia used Charleston's most popular fitness event, the Cooper River Bridge Run, to encourage a Veteran to work aggressively toward recovery after a leg amputation.

The Bridge Run, which celebrated its 40th anniversary at this year's April 1 event, is the nation's third largest 10K race and attracts tens of thousands of participants, including Tumminia's patient, Army Veteran Darrell Bivens.

Last year, after experiencing complications of diabetes, Bivens underwent a foot amputation at Charleston VAMC, which resulted in the loss of the lower half of his right leg. He then spent months with Tumminia working to rebuild his confidence and get back on his feet with this new prosthetic leg.

"When this first happened initially, I didn't know what was going to happen to me," Bivens said. "I didn't think I'd ever walk again."

"When I first met Mr. Bivens, at the end of June last year, he was in a wheelchair and he had a goal to walk three miles—he achieved that by August," said Tumminia. "Then, last fall, he made a joke about doing the Bridge Run. I didn't let him just joke about it—I pressed him. We made it a goal and he stuck to it."

Tumminia encouraged Bivens to train for the challenging walk, developing special exercises that would assist him with navigating the incline, and even agreed to join him and his family on event day as they participated.

"Saturday was a goal to walk over the bridge with this prosthetic," said Bivens. "Just to see if I could do it."

And he did. Together, the team traveled more than six miles from start to finish, crossing the finish line after two and half hours of arduous exertion with plenty of encouragement from race participants and onlookers along the way.

"He's going to be in my life forever," Tumminia said. "I will never forget him or his effort. I'll admit, I got a little weepy when we finished, but I wasn't going to let anyone see. I'm just beyond proud of him and of the work we do here."

Veteran Amputee Darrell Bivens crosses the finish line April 1 at the Cooper River Bridge Run with VA Physical Therapist Janine Tumminia (left) and his wife Shirelle Bivens (right) by his side. *(Courtesy Photo by Island Photo)*

Horses for Heroes is an eight-week program that provides a therapeutic environment for Veterans through taking care of, and developing a relationship with, a horse.

Army Veterans Charlie Copson with his equine partner, Ty. (*Photo by James Arrowood*)

Horses for Heroes graduates become Veteran mentors

By JW Huckfeldt, Public Affairs Specialist Trainee

Emerson Beach and Charlie Copson are not horsing around. In fact, both Veterans recently graduated from Rein and Shine's Horses for Heroes program, sponsored by the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center's Veteran Enrichment Center (VEC). Now, they will help new Veterans enrolled in the program by serving as mentors.

Horses for Heroes is an eight-week program that provides a therapeutic environment for Veterans by allowing them to take care of, and develop a relationship with, a horse. Beach and Copson guide new Veterans through bonding with a horse and help them overcome the intimidation of working with an animal weighing approximately a half ton. The mentors teach Veterans entering the program how to groom—brush, clean hooves, and care for—the horse, which builds a bond of trust between the Veteran and their equine partner.

"Being a Veteran mentor is very exciting," said Charleston VAMC Volunteer Emerson Beach. "Horses for Heroes changed my way of life."

Copson and Beach encourage the new class of Veterans through every step of their two-month journey into equine therapy. The programs helps Veterans not only learn about a horse, but also improve their social, communication, and behavioral skills. Most important of all, equine therapy instills a sense of accomplishment once a Veteran is able to mount a horse for the first time and become a single entity with their equine partner.

Beach, a Navy Veteran, suffers from brain damage and used to find comfort by isolating himself at home.

"The thought of going out scared me," Beach said. "I was afraid to try Rein and Shine, but Hagen helped to make the scariness go away."

Hagen, a brown German warmblood horse, bonded with Beach shortly after they met.

"Hagen helped me mellow out," Beach mentioned. "He helped me realize that the world isn't as scary as I once thought."

Beach's confidence since starting the program has increased tremendously. Beach recently galloped with Hagen—a horse he initially feared. Galloping is a horse's fastest running pace and requires intensive riding expertise, concentration and balance.

The strong connection formed between Veteran and horse in the program can be positive healing force in the Veteran's life.

When Army Veteran Charlie Copson had to put Bailey, his Golden Retriever dog and best friend, to sleep, he swore he'd never get emotionally involved with anyone or anything again. Copson, who is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and walks with a prosthetic leg, wasn't coping well with his loss.

"I was alone and it hurt," Copson recalled. "I have a hard time developing relationships but Ty helped me overcome that."

Ty, a chestnut gelding horse with Rein and Shine's Horses for Heroes program, partnered with Copson and the two started developing an instant relationship.

Copson loved Horses for Heroes and looks forward to mentoring Veterans new to the program.

"It's an awesome feeling to help encourage people to connect with a living being," said Copson. "By learning from my mistakes, I can teach new Veterans that there is nothing scary about working with horses."

Copson and Beach overcame significant life obstacles with the help of equine therapy. Both Veterans are living richer, fuller lives and continue to work with their horses regularly while mentoring new Veterans on fundamental horsemanship. Their message to all Veterans is clear—if we can do it, anyone can.

For more information on Horses for Heroes, call the Veteran Enrichment Center at 843-789-6314.

Navy Veteran Emerson Beach adjusts Hagen's halter before the day's activities. (*Photo by James Arrowood*)

Important VA Phone Numbers

Charleston VA Medical Center
843-577-5011 or
toll-free **1-888-878-6884**
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 a.m. to 4 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 a.m. to 4 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, seven 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.

Veterans Crisis Line
1-800-273-TALK (8255), Press 1 for Veterans
Veterans can call the Veterans Crisis Line to talk to trained professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week or visit www.veteranscrisisline.net.

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.

Looking for more ways to improve your health and well-being?

Veterans Health Library

Your source for health information

The Veterans Health Library is a free resource in partnership with My HealtheVet to help Veterans stay well and healthy, and take an active role in their health care. It provides Veterans, family members, and caregivers 24/7 access to comprehensive Veteran-focused health information including more than 1,500 health sheets, more than 150 videos, go-to-guides and flipbooks that have been approved by VA experts. These include topics specific to Veterans, for example, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), combat-related traumatic brain injury and Agent Orange.

www.veteranshealthlibrary.org