

A Veterans Day Editorial: Change at the VA?

"Meet the new boss,
Same as the old boss.
Won't Get Fooled Again!"
-Peter Townshend

Today we honor our veterans. A year ago VA patients languished on waiting lists waiting for healthcare. VA administrators hid the truth at over 100 VAs and took bonuses for meeting their wait time goals. Money has been poured into the VA, patients in rural areas are seen outside the VA, and it is now supposedly easier to fire other senior VA officials. Dennis Wagner authored an article in the Arizona Republic that claimed the VA has made some changes but more changes are needed (1). I agree with the need for change but would argue that there has been no real change at the VA.

Last week I saw a VA patient in my private practice. He was paying for tiotropium or Spiriva®, a long-acting anticholinergic used in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, out of his pocket. He was under the impression that the VA did not "carry" tiotropium. I told him that this was not true and that he should go to the VA and ask to be seen in pulmonary clinic if his primary care physician could not prescribe tiotropium. He was sent to the pharmacy where the pharmacist wanted to know why I would prescribe this expensive drug. He was sent back to my office for a response. I xeroxed a copy of my notes and gave them to the patient. I do not know whether he got the tiotropium but my guess is that probably not without some hassle. This is unchanged from prior to the scandal when patient care was undermined by healthcare support staff. **No real change there.**

Last night, the new Secretary of the VA, Robert McDonald, was on "60 Minutes" (2). He announced that he is "reorganizing" the VA. Although details were not stated, this sounded mostly like a consolidation of websites, not a bad thing, but hardly a "reorganization". He also said how sorry he was for past mistakes and how the new VA was going to do better. I had déjà vu going back to the mid 90's with Ken Kaiser's "Prescription for Change" (3). Eric Shinseki, the VA secretary recently forced to resign, used similar rhetoric and was "mad as hell" at the falsified wait lists (4). **No real change there.**

McDonald used the term "customers" to refer to VA patients (2). This has occurred off and on since the mid 90's and is a term some healthcare providers find offensive. We do not flip burgers at McDonald's and find it inappropriate and offensive to equate healthcare professionals with businessmen selling Charmin, Luvs, Pampers, Gillette razors, Covergirl makeup, etc. **No real change there.**

Earlier this week, the VA named a new director at the Phoenix VA, ground zero of the VA scandal (5). He is the former director of the Milwaukee VA and director of the VA's Rocky Mountain regional network, apparently coaxed out of retirement to serve for about a year as director at the troubled medical center. He replaces two directors who

served a matter of months. While director at the Rocky Mountain VA region he named Cynthia McCormack, former chief of nursing at the Phoenix VA, as director of the Cheyenne VA (6). Cheyenne was second only to Phoenix in having the widespread falsification of wait times discovered. Sharon Helman, the Phoenix VA director sits at home suspended while collecting a paycheck but McCormack appears to continue to direct the Cheyenne VA. **No real change there.**

Although a handful of administrators have been fired by the VA, the data falsification was rampant, with **most** VAs apparently falsifying their records (2). Yet these administrators retain their jobs and continue to rule their healthcare empires. McDonald claimed that names had been turned over to the Department of Justice (DOJ), but the DOJ declined to prosecute, and that administrative law judges were blocking the firing of administrators (2). **No real change there.**

The VA still functions with a lack of oversight. Congressmen make statements and issue press releases when politically convenient. The VA office of inspector general (VAOIG) still does investigations in response to whistle-blowers. After turning over their findings to VA central office to water down, the VAOIG usually makes some recommendations that are quickly accepted but not acted on by the VA (7). **No real change there.**

Lastly, there is the popular media. For years we heard about Ken Kizer's "Prescription for Change" and the miracle of the transformation to the VA (3,8). This infuriated many of us who knew it was not true (9). We wondered why the press was so accepting of the claims. They certainly are not on other political issues. However, in this case Dennis Wagner of the Arizona Republic, CNN and several other news sources stayed with the story and ferreted out the truth. **Real change there.** Hopefully, news media will continue their investigative reporting and question VA officials when they put forth self-serving data that is difficult to believe. This is my hope and may be the only result of the VA scandal that will force change. Hopefully the media "won't get fooled again".

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