

What Does Shulkin's Firing Mean for the VA?

David Shulkin MD, Secretary for Veterans Affairs (VA), was finally fired by President Donald Trump ending long speculation (1). Trump nominated his personal physician, Ronny Jackson MD, to fill Shulkin's post. The day after his firing, Shulkin criticized his firing in a NY Times op-ed claiming pro-privatization factions within the Trump administration led to his ouster (2). "They saw me as an obstacle to privatization who had to be removed," Dr. Shulkin wrote. "That is because I am convinced that privatization is a political issue aimed at rewarding select people and companies with profits, even if it undermines care for veterans."

Former Secretary Shulkin's tenure at the VA has had several controversies. First, as undersecretary of Veterans Healthcare and later as secretary money appropriated to the VA to obtain private care under the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Acts of 2014 and the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017 appears to have been largely squandered on administrative salaries and expenses rather than hiring healthcare providers to shorten VA wait times (3). Second, Shulkin took a trip with his wife to Europe eventually ending up at Wimbledon to watch tennis (4). The purpose of his trip was ostensibly to attend a London Summit with senior officials from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to discuss topical issues related to veterans. Although the summit occurred over 2 1/2 days, Shulkin and his wife traveled for 11 days at the taxpayer expense including a side trip to Denmark.

"The private sector, already struggling to provide adequate access to care in many communities, is ill-prepared to handle the number and complexity of patients that would come from closing or downsizing V.A. hospitals and clinics, particularly when it involves the mental health needs of people scarred by the horrors of war," Dr. Shulkin wrote (2). "Working with community providers to adequately ensure that veterans' needs are met is a good practice. But privatization leading to the dismantling of the department's extensive health care system is a terrible idea." Going on Shulkin states that, "Unfortunately, the department [VA] has become entangled in a brutal power struggle, with some political appointees choosing to promote their agendas instead of what's best for veterans ... These individuals, who seek to privatize veteran health care as an alternative to government-run VA care, unfortunately fail to engage in realistic plans regarding who will care for the more than 9 million veterans who rely on the department for life-sustaining care."

However, the VA for many years has engaged in a relentless expansion of administration at the expense of healthcare. In the absence of sufficient oversight, Shulkin and VA Central Office did little to curb this trend (3).

Assuming he is confirmed, what will Ronny Jackson, Shulkin's replacement, do? It seems likely that he will do exactly what Shulkin alleges and Trump apparently

wants, i.e., privatize VA healthcare. Whether Jackson will be able to bend the large VA bureaucracy towards privatization is another matter given his lack of healthcare administrative experience. Shulkin may also be right that privatization may only reward select people and companies with profits rather than improving veterans' care. Regardless, healthcare is more expensive than not delivering healthcare, so the price will probably rise. Time will tell, but something needs to be done. To paraphrase former VA undersecretary Ken Kizer, it is time for another "Prescription for Change" at the VA.

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References

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*Dr. Robbins has received compensation for providing healthcare to veterans under the VA Choice Act.