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Pacific Partners News Briefs



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VA Telemedicine— The Pacific Challenge

The Veterans Administration was established by President Abraham Lincoln following the Civil War, when it became apparent that the United States had a special obligation and commitment to help soldiers that were in need of social, medical, and other services. Since that time, the commitment to veterans has become deep-rooted in the policies of the U.S. Congress. These policies and programs are administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Medical services to veterans are provided through VA Medical and Regional Office Centers (VAMROCs), VA hospitals, and public and private health care providers. In the Pacific, the Spark M. Matsunaga VA Medical and Regional Office Center (VAMROC) serves an estimated 127,600 veterans in Hawaii, American Samoa, and Guam. While the Honolulu VAMROC is part of a larger Regional VISN that includes California and Nevada, the special role of the Honolulu VAMROC is to provide services to veterans in the Pacific. This is the VA's Pacific Challenge.



The Pacific VAMROC provides outpatient primary medical care, mental health care and dental care, and specialized outpatient treatment through programs including substance abuse, day treatment, geriatric evaluation and management. The VA provides the services through several medical specialty clinics staffed by VA and University of Hawaii faculty physicians. These services moved to the new VA Ambulatory Care Center, located at Tripler Medical Center in the spring of 2000 as part of the VA -DoD Joint Venture.

Long term and transitional rehabilitation and

medical care services are provided by the VA 60 bed Center for Aging located on the Tripler Medical Center grounds, and VA staffed inpatient psychiatric care and partial hospitalization care are also provided using 20 beds and space at Tripler Medical Center. A 16 bed VA Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Residential Program is operated in Hilo on the Island of Hawaii. Medical and surgical inpatient care for veterans is provided either via a VA/DoD sharing agreement with Tripler Army Medical Center or via non-VA care providers in the community. A Home Based Primary Care program also operates out of the Center for Aging for veterans on Oahu.

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The VAMROC is affiliated with the University of Hawaii John A. Burns School of Medicine in the areas of internal medicine, psychiatry and geriatrics. Clerkship training for medical students is provided in internal medicine and psychiatry. Nursing, social work, laboratory technician, and medical assistant students also participate in training through the University of Hawaii affiliation. Training is provided for dental students via an affiliation with Boston University, and for psychology interns and postdoctoral students, pharmacy and occupational therapy students from accredited schools throughout the nation.

Within the community, it is especially important to note that the Honolulu VAMROC seeks to collaborate with other health care providers, research institutions and academic programs. This is an especially important element of the Pacific VAMROC since veterans live in communities that may not have VA or DOD health care facilities and must be treated by VA health care network partners. Indeed, the VA must work with other health care organizations because its patients not only receive services from VA or DoD facilities, but from the health care providers in their own communities.

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Telehealth and Telemedicine for Veterans in the Pacific

The U.S. Congress, in 1999, urged the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs to “conduct a feasibility analysis of a VA telemedicine project at the Honolulu VAMROC to assess the value of telemedicine and telecommunications technologies to deliver health care services to veterans residing throughout the islands of the Pacific Region.” Congress understood the special challenges of providing services to veterans in the Pacific. This feasibility assessment is in progress and a report is expected to be submitted in the summer of this year.

Concurrent to the passage of the Congressional request, the Honolulu VAMROC had already initiated a telehealth and telemedicine initiative. The initiative consists of three major program elements:

- development of a mission statement and program focused on using telehealth and telemedicine to extend services to veterans in the Pacific region;
- establishment of a basic telehealth infrastructure with links to other networks and health care providers; and,
- initiation of clinical telehealth activities.

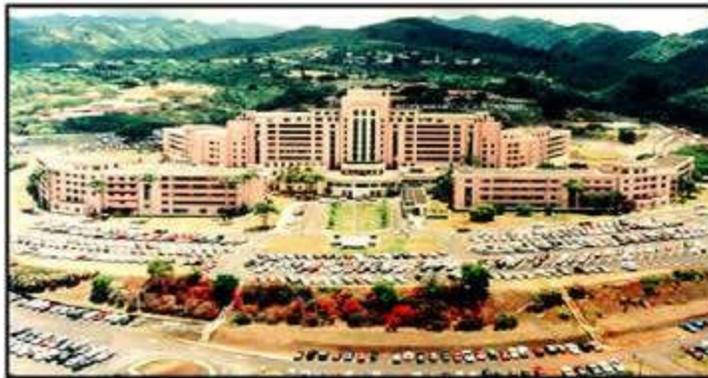
Defining the Mission

The telehealth initiative conceptualized in 1999 emerged from consultations of VA clinicians, specialists in the field, and health care providers that the VA works with in Hawaii and the Pacific. The basic mission statement of the VAMROC telehealth and telemedicine initiative is simple — to improve the quality and accessibility of health care for veterans in the Pacific region.

Achieving this simple mission, however, requires careful research, thought, and the adaptation and/or development of “best practices” to ensure that the VA is able to fulfill the mission.

As part of this mission, the Spark M. Matsunaga VAMROC defined several program foci. Patient Focused Telehealth - The Honolulu VAMROC has clearly defined an emphasis on a “patient-focused” telehealth. This program focus seeks to exploit the use of telehealth to directly provide and enhance patient

care delivery via remote access to health care services and providers. This emphasis is seen by our clinicians and partners as central to the VA program — since it serves as the foundation for other program activities. The emphasis on a Patient Focused Telehealth approach is built on a library of telehealth research and knowledge; technology tools to support and enable clinicians/technicians to assess, diagnose, treat, and follow-up patients in the Pacific; and a center for evaluating the successes and weaknesses of emerging telehealth technologies and applications.



Envisioned as part of this Patient Focused Telehealth are electronic consultation requests, the forwarding of the consultation request to the appropriate VA, DOD, or civilian specialty provider, and offering treatment or referral in

a store-and-forward and/or real-time environment. The objective is to ensure that telehealth provides the same, if not a better, caliber of care as rendered in face-to-face patient and other patient-clinician interactions.

Research Telemedicine Outcomes - The Honolulu VAMROC, along with its academic and research partners, will investigate promising clinical applications of telehealth, develop research and explore concepts in a clinical telehealth setting. VAMROC clinicians will work together with researchers and health care providers to frame clinical research questions, examine promising applications, explore critical issues, and evaluate the validity of claims of successes and conditions. This will not only result in furthering real services based to patients, but also contribute to the scientific discipline of clinical informatics, clinical telemedicine, and public health and nursing disciplines.

Telehealth Concept Exploration and Development - The Honolulu VAMROC, along with its health care provider, academic and research partners, will also explore and investigate promising clinical applications of telehealth. VAMROC will develop and examine telehealth concepts in a clinical telehealth setting.

Distance Learning and Continuing Health Care Education - The VAMROC sees the sharing of education and training with various organizations in the

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Pacific to include medical, public health, and nursing education. This will be accomplished through partnerships with other health related distance learning programs, mentorships, virtual grand rounds, continuing education, and conferences. This program venue further seeks to provide patients and clinicians with access to information promoting self-care and wellness and also includes patient and family health and illness

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education in collaboration with public health care and nursing specialties via similar technology options.

Progress

Since beginning the initiative in late 1999, the Spark M. Matsunaga VAMROC has:

- Developed a basic program infrastructure for VAMROC. The VA has established a VA Telehealth Center that is being managed by a VA team that will be led by Craig Oswald, the former Special Assistant to the Director. In addition, Norman Dodd, the former Deputy Director of the Information Resources Management section has been detailed on a full-time basis to assist the VA clinical telehealth teams to implement VA telemedicine. Additionally, the VA has hired additional consultants to work with the VA and its partners.
- The VA Telehealth Team has established a Telehealth Center in the new E Wing of the Honolulu VAMROC. The VA team is co-located with the Telemedicine Team of the Tripler Army Medical Center.
- The VA has a long-standing link with the other VA facilities to share information. The VA firmly believes that clinical telehealth must be integrated with clinical informatics. This is an important characteristic of the VA telehealth program since the VA does not want to establish trials that are not capable of being evaluated and/or integrated into a patient record.
- The VA has established an internal network among its clinics in Hawaii and has established a connection to the State of Hawaii

Telehealth Access Network or STAN. Since the UH Telemedicine Project and other health care providers are connected to the network, the link will enable VA clinicians to interact with other clinicians as needed.

- Initial telemedicine equipment has been acquired to enable clinicians to trial clinical protocols using digital otoscopes and the like. Additionally, the VA has implemented a Picture Archiving and Image Capture System (PACS) and is working on other initiatives such as a robotic dispensary.

Partnerships

There are several important relationships that the VA has entered into that will help to shape the nature of delivering health care in the Pacific region.

Pacific Hui - The VA and Tripler Army Medical Center have entered into an agreement to jointly develop telehealth and telemedicine clinical applications that will benefit the VA and DoD populations. The VA looks forward to this partnership as a complement to the telemedicine program of the VAMROC.

American Samoa - The VA has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) Tropical Medical Center (TMC). This MOU calls for co-locating the VA presence in a wing of the LBJ Tropical Medical Center, the sharing of facilities and resources, and the implementation of the VA VISTA system.

STAN and PEACESAT Partnerships—The VA has joined and has become a major Partner of the State of Hawaii Telehealth Access Network (STAN). The partnership enabled the shared use of telehealth and telemedicine connections.



Pacific Health Care Alliance - The VA, University of Hawaii, Hawaii Health Systems Corporation, and other organizations have been collaborating on the conceptualization of a Pacific Health Care Alliance. This Alliance will help to better coordinate the delivery of health care in the

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region and promote the continuing sharing of resources among the Pacific partners.

UH School of Medicine-VA Partnerships - The VA has ongoing relationships with the John A Burns School of Medicine to deliver services. The VA will cooperate with the Telemedicine Project of the School of Medicine. This will include beta test of telemedicine curriculum and training programs that are being developed by the UH School of Medicine.

Providing improved health care and other services to veterans is a primary mission of the VAMROC. The VA Telehealth and Telemedicine Initiative is positioned to provide such services. This will be extended to other allied health disciplines so that the best practices in the field can be tested, demonstrated, evaluated, and extended beyond the Pacific region.

Telehealth and Telemedicine Team of the Veterans Administration

One of the priorities of the new Director of the Veterans Administration in Hawaii has been to use telehealth and telemedicine to improve the delivery of health care to veterans in Hawaii and the Pacific. As a result, since early 1999, the Veterans Administration (VA) in Hawaii has been developing a patient focused telehealth initiative. The telehealth initiative was planned to follow the move of the VA Medical and Regional Office Center or "VAMROC" from the Federal Building to the new "E-Wing" on the campus of the Tripler Army Medical Center. In the move, additional connectivity between the VA and its clinics, its facilities within the TAMC, and the Pacific were planned.

In December 1999, the VA and the Tripler Army Medical Center signed a Memorandum of Understanding that establishes a Pacific Telehealth Hui. The "Hui" will focus on joint DoD and VA telehealth and telemedicine activities. This very significant step was witnessed by Senator Daniel K. Inouye, who was very pleased with these cooperative developments.

With the move substantially completed, H. David Burge, the Director of the Pacific VAMROC and Dr. Steven MacBride, the VA Clinical Director, established its VA Telehealth Team in March 2000. The VA appointed Mr. Craig Oswald as the VAMROC Director of Telehealth and Norman Dodd as the Deputy Director of the program. The two will

work with the VA clinical staff, academic institutions, and other partners to operationalize a "patient-focused" telehealth program. They will also serve as the VA Hui Managers, working in collaboration with representatives from the Tripler Army Medical Center. The telemedicine teams of the VA and TAMC are now co-located E-Wing of the VA. In addition to working with the TAMC on the Pacific Hui, the VA has initiated the planning of its internal telehealth network.



David Burge



Dr. Steven MacBride



Norman Dodd



Craig Oswald

One of its first tasks has been to establish an internal telehealth and telemedicine planning methodology to help ensure that patient-focused clinical protocols are developed and implemented and outcomes monitored. The VA initiative is planned to have wide involvement with health care providers, academic institutions, and other organizations since the VA has many established academic and research affiliations and because the VA works with community health care providers. The VA has many academic and research affiliations, including John A. Burns School of Medicine. The VA also has partnerships with other health care providers throughout the Pacific since veterans live in the communities.