New Frontiers in Medicine

Program Spotlight: Research

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Dear Veterans,

One of the most rewarding aspects of my job working for Veterans is the opportunity to meet and talk with many of you on a daily basis. Your stories of courage and sacrifice in defense of our great nation are what drive me to ensure we at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System never falter on our promise to provide you with the best care, anywhere.

For many of you, that sense of duty to help others remained with you after you left military service and sought care through VA: Over the past 90 years, thousands of you have volunteered to help VA researchers discover innovations in health care.

Your participation in VA research benefits not only Veterans, but also improves upon existing medical knowledge for all Americans. Without your help, the groundbreaking achievements of VA investigators that resulted in three Nobel prizes and numerous other distinctions would not have been possible.

VA Pittsburgh’s more than 100 investigators study ways to improve health care through the following research programs: Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion (CHERP); Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Center (GRECC); Human Engineering Research Laboratories (HERL); and the Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC).

If you would like to learn more about research at VA Pittsburgh, I invite you to turn to page 6 of this edition of Veterans Connect.

Sincerely,

Karin L. McGraw, MSN, FACHE
Medical Center Director

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**IMPROVING ACCESS TO CARE: WAIT TIME UPDATE**

The wait times listed below are the most recent available for our University Drive and H.J. Heinz sites from VA’s new [Access and Quality in VA Healthcare tool](https://www.accesstocare.va.gov) as of publication.* The online resource at [www.accesstocare.va.gov](http://www.accesstocare.va.gov) is easy to use and breaks down data at each of our two main sites and five community-based clinics. Future editions will include data available through the new online tool.

**UNIVERSITY DRIVE**

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<th>Wait Time</th>
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<td>Mental Health</td>
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**H.J. HEINZ**

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<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td><strong>1</strong> day</td>
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* Data presented is for established patients in March 2017. Data previously published here and elsewhere since June 2014 was drawn from [www.va.gov/health/access-audit.asp](http://www.va.gov/health/access-audit.asp), which will continue to update every two weeks. The two sites present data through different, but meaningful, data definitions.

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Army Veteran Jeffery DeZwaan was skeptical when his doctor suggested he try VA Pittsburgh’s Interdisciplinary Pain Rehabilitation Program (IPRP) to learn how to manage his chronic back pain without opioids. The outpatient program teaches Veterans skills to self-manage chronic pain, including mindfulness techniques, physical exercises and tai chi movements. “I thought some of the program’s techniques were hokey, but I went in with an open mind, and it’s been the greatest thing I ever did,” said DeZwaan. “You learn how to manage your pain mentally and physically.”

IPRP is based on research and clinical experience that shows a holistic approach toward managing pain is more helpful than just using medications. “Chronic pain is a complex problem, and medication management usually is not enough,” said psychologist Cynthia Kirsch, IPRP program manager. “Pain is affected by people’s thoughts, feelings and behaviors, which is why a more holistic approach can improve functioning.”

IPRP’s 12 weekly sessions include a pain management group, an educational series, tai chi, and physical and occupational therapies. The pain management group teaches skills such as relaxation and breathing techniques, while occupational therapy shows Veterans how to perform daily tasks without aggravating their pain.

Kirsch said Veterans who continuously work the program report reduced pain and improved mobility, mood and energy levels. DeZwaan said he practices IPRP skills daily, and his opioid prescriptions typically expire before he uses them. “It shows you how to push your pain to the back of your head, so it doesn’t dominate you,” DeZwaan said.

When opioids are necessary for pain management, VA’s Opioid Safety Initiative sets guidelines for the safe and efficient use of prescription opioids. VA Pittsburgh’s Opioid Use Review Clinic is another tool that allows clinicians to help Veterans meet their pain management and quality of life goals while safely using prescription opioids.

It shows you how to push your pain to the back of your head, so it doesn’t dominate you.”

Army Veteran Jeffery DeZwaan

For more information on IPRP or other alternative pain management programs available through VA Pittsburgh, talk to your primary care provider or call 412-360-3557.
Connect to Your Care

**Audiology:** Hearing, tinnitus and balance disorders. 412-360-6400

**Behavioral Health:** Consultation, evaluation and treatment. 412-360-6600

**Caregiver Services:** Help at home and someone to listen. 412-822-2364 or 1-855-260-3274

**Center for Treatment of Addictive Disorders:** Outpatient and residential treatment for the misuse of alcohol, prescribed medications or other substances. Residential: 412-360-6611 Outpatient: 412-360-6092

**Chaplain Services:** 412-822-1551

**Community Based Care:** Services to help chronically ill or disabled Veterans of any age remain in their homes. 412-822-2910

**Connected Care:** Telehealth, VA Mobile and more. 412-360-3235

**Critical Care:** Inpatient care for life-threatening injuries and illnesses. 412-360-6215 (CCU, ICU, etc.)

**Dental:** 412-822-2130

**Emergency Department:** 24-hour emergency health care, including mental health services. 412-360-6322

**Eye Clinic:** 412-360-6700

**Homeless Veterans:** Transitional and permanent housing, case management, dental and medical care. 412-822-1272

**Help for Homeless Veterans hotline:** 877-4AID-VET (424-3838)

**Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Veterans:** Culturally and clinically competent care for LGBT Veterans. 412-360-1210

**Military Sexual Trauma:** Help for any Veteran who experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment during military service. 412-360-1040

**My HealtheVet:** Online access to health records, electronic messaging and prescription refills. www.myhealth.va.gov 412-360-6838

**Pathology and Laboratory:** 412-360-1572

**Patient Advocate:** 412-360-3614 or 412-822-1562

**Pharmacy:** Refill prescriptions by phone, mail or the internet. 412-822-3140

**Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation:** Inpatient and outpatient physical, occupational, and kinesiotherapy, low vision and blind rehab services. 412-822-2111

**Primary Care:** Annual checkups, nutrition counseling and more. 412-822-3000

**Podiatry:** 412-360-6700

**Prosthetics:** 412-822-3728

**Radiology:** X-ray, ultrasound, CT, and MRI. 412-360-6216

**Rainbow Clinic:** 412-360-6242

**Research:** Improving lives through health care discovery and innovation. 412-360-2386

**Speech Pathology:** Treatments for speech, language, voice, cognitive communication, swallowing impairments and training for stroke patients. 412-360-6400

**Spinal Cord Injury:** 412-822-3000

**Surgical Services:** Same-day surgery, neurosurgery and cardiothoracic, hand, ophthalmology, orthopedic, otolaryngology, plastic and vascular surgery. 412-360-6700

**Transition and Care Management Program:** Health care tailored to post-911 Veterans. 412-822-2362

**Travel Office:** 412-360-3620 or 412-360-6783

**Vet Centers:** Counseling and referral for combat Veterans, their families, and any Veteran who was sexually traumatized while serving. McKeesport: 412-678-7704 Pittsburgh: 412-920-1765 Wheeling: 304-232-0587

**Veterans Crisis Line:** Confidential help for Veterans in crisis and their families and friends. www.veteranscrisisline.net 1-800-273-8255 (press 1) Text to 838255

**Voluntary and Recreation Services:** 412-822-3098

**Women’s Health Services:** 412-360-6289

Not all Veterans are eligible for every service listed.

For a more comprehensive list of services, visit [www.pittsburgh.va.gov/services](http://www.pittsburgh.va.gov/services)
Honoring All Who Served

American Revolution (1775-1783)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 217,000

War of 1812 (1812-1815)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 286,730

Indian Wars (approx. 1817-1898)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 106,000

Mexican War (1846-1848)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 78,718

Civil War (1861-1865)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 2,213,363 (Union), 1,050,000 (Confederate)

Spanish-American War (1898-1902)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 306,760

World War I (1917-1918)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 4,734,991

World War II (1941 –1945)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 16,112,566

Korean War (1950-1953)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 5,720,000

Vietnam War (1964-1975)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 8,744,000

Desert Shield/Desert Storm (1990-1991)
Total U.S. Servicemembers: 2,322,000

Post 9/11 (Oct 2001 - present)
Includes operations Enduring Freedom (OEF), Iraqi Freedom (OIF), New Dawn (OND), Inherent Resolve (OIR) and Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS).

LIVING VETERANS: 21,368,000

Sources:
va.gov/opa/publications and Defense Casualty Analysis System

Camp Lejeune Compensation Rule
Veterans who served at Camp Lejeune for at least 30 days from Aug. 1, 1953, to Dec. 31, 1987, or their survivors may be eligible for VA care or compensation for the following illnesses:
• Adult leukemia
• Aplastic anemia and other myelodysplastic syndromes
• Multiple myeloma
• Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma
• Parkinson’s disease
• Bladder, kidney and liver cancer

Burn Pit Registry
VA’s Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry documents Veterans’ exposure to waste-disposal burn pits. Eligible Veterans served in Southwest Asia on or after Aug. 2, 1990 (including Desert Storm, Desert Shield, OEF, OIF, OND and OPS) or Afghanistan or Djibouti on or after Sept. 11, 2001.

For more information, please visit www.publichealth.va.gov or talk to your primary care provider.

VETERANS CONNECT | spring/summer 2017 5
New Frontiers in Medicine
Veterans play vital role in VA Pittsburgh research

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System’s nationally recognized research programs develop cutting-edge therapies to help Veterans and all Americans. Our researchers have pioneered organ transplantation surgery, harnessed brain waves to move robotic arms, expedited the approval process of quick-cure hepatitis C drugs and developed lightweight aluminum wheelchairs that are now the VA standard.

VA Pittsburgh last year dedicated $30 million to health care research. During Research Week in May, we recognized our more than 100 investigators for their work on some 340 projects in 2016.

“Veteran participation in research plays an important role in the development of better treatments for diseases that afflict Veterans, ultimately helping other Veterans who are afflicted with the same diseases.”
– Dr. Steven H. Graham, associate chief of staff for Research and Development

VA’s Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion (CHERP) focuses on advancing the quality and equity of Veterans’ health care. Its findings in two recent studies will improve surgery outcomes in frail older Veterans and encourage opioid safety among Veterans who obtain prescriptions from non-VA providers.

**CASE STUDY:** Veterans who use both VA and non-VA health care are at risk of lack of coordination among medical providers. A CHERP study of diabetic Veterans enrolled in both VA and Medicare services will help VA better understand how Veterans seen within VA interact with care outside VA.

“As VA expands options for non-VA care among Veterans, studies such as ours that create more sophisticated ways to measure this dual use will help VA better meet the needs of these Veterans.”
– Dr. Walid Gellad, principal investigator

VA’s Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Center (GRECC) improves health care for older Veterans. Research areas include stroke rehabilitation, pain therapies in the elderly, geriatric cardiology and communication disorders.

**CASE STUDY:** GRECC’s Program for Intensive Residential Aphasia Treatment and Education (PIRATE) helps Veterans and active duty Servicemembers with aphasia, a stroke side effect that impairs the ability to speak, understand, read or write. Eight PIRATE research studies are currently underway.

“PIRATE clinical and research programs assist Veterans with aphasia by maximizing their ability to communicate and to successfully engage in social and other valued life activities within their communities.”
– Patrick Doyle, Ph.D., associate director for research, GRECC
Human Engineering Research Laboratories (HERL) is a joint program with VA, the University of Pittsburgh and UPMC. HERL researchers use the most up-to-date technology — including robotics — to create mobility solutions for disabled Veterans, wounded Servicemembers and others with disabilities.

**CASE STUDY:** A HERL study found although Veterans rely on smartphone reminder apps to compensate for memory problems caused by traumatic brain injury (TBI), training resources are inadequate. HERL’s research suggests app developers make training readily available to best serve Veterans.

“Our study also found researchers need to develop technological solutions to help Veterans with TBI improve their ability to recall names and faces, manage emotions and complete multi-step tasks.” — Dan Ding, Ph.D., research scientist, HERL

VA’s Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC) develops programs and treatments to help Veterans in mental health recovery. Its researchers are currently studying whether intensive telehealth monitoring reduces the risk of suicide among Veterans.

**CASE STUDY:** Difficult-to-treat depression and insomnia are common in older Veterans. Treating insomnia improves many forms of depression, but it’s unknown if treatment improves difficult-to-treat depression. MIRECC researchers are studying whether behavioral treatments or talk therapy for insomnia can improve difficult-to-treat depression without the use of medications.

“This study is important to Veterans because it helps us understand their views on depression and insomnia, and it also helps us understand their preferences for treatment.” — Dr. Marie Anne Gebara, MIRECC fellow
FOCUS ON HEALTHY LIVING

Diet Key to Healthy Heart

Domenic Donovan was overweight and newly diagnosed with high blood pressure two years ago when he adopted a healthier diet and started exercising.

“My VA doctors wanted to load me up with medications to lower my blood pressure with pills, and I didn’t want to do that,” said Donovan, an Air Force Veteran with a family history of heart disease. “I wanted to control it naturally.”

Donovan had lost weight previously with VA Pittsburgh’s MOVE! Weight Management Program, but he gained it back when he stopped following the program’s diet and exercise recommendations. When he restarted the program, he managed to lose weight and lower his blood pressure.

“I cleaned up my diet and lost 30 to 40 pounds,” said Donovan. “I now eat a fair amount of salads and fruits and vegetables, and for a little over two years, my blood pressure has been fine.”

Donovan doesn’t follow any specific diet, but he uses MOVE! program tips to choose healthy foods.

Want advice on heart-healthy diets? Our MOVE! program administrators suggest following a traditional Mediterranean diet. A number of studies show such a diet can reduce the risk of heart disease.

A Mediterranean diet emphasizes:

- Exercise
- Eating fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes and nuts
- Using healthy fats such as olive and canola oil in place of butter
- Trading salt for herbs and spices
- Limiting red meat and eating fish and poultry at least twice weekly

To enroll in MOVE!, contact Melanie Erskine at 412-822-3114.

Contributing source: Mayo Clinic

HEALTHY RECIPES

Spiced Sweet Roasted Red Pepper Hummus

Ingredients:
1 can (15 ounces) garbanzo beans, drained
1 jar (4 ounces) roasted red peppers
3 tablespoons lemon juice
1 1/2 tablespoons tahini
1 clove minced garlic
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon fresh chopped parsley

Directions:
In an electric blender or food processor, puree all ingredients except the chopped parsley. Process with long pulses until mixture is fairly smooth and slightly fluffy, scraping the sides of the processor or blender in between pulses. Transfer to serving bowl and refrigerate at least one hour. Top with chopped parsley before serving. Serves 8.

Calories: 64, Fat: 2.2 g, Carb: 9.6 g, Cholesterol: 0 g

Source: allrecipes.com
When Chaplain Alan Morris first met Bill (not his real name) in a hospital room at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, the Veteran turned his back to him.

“That happens sometimes when you wear the collar,” said Morris, one of 23 full- and part-time chaplains and residents who provide round-the-clock spiritual care to Veterans and employees at the system’s two campuses. “We take it in stride.”

Morris is the palliative and hospice care chaplain at the H.J. Heinz campus.

“In end-of-life care, we work to provide a good death for Veterans and their families,” Morris said. “A good death requires peace of mind, not only for Veterans, but for their families, as well.”

When Bill entered hospice, he continued to shun Morris, his caregivers and his family. He opened up only after a hospice volunteer learned of his great love of creation and living things, prompting nurses to place a large potted plant in his room.

Bill quickly adopted the plant and spoke passionately about it with all who would listen. The breakthrough allowed Morris to build more bridges with the Veteran.

“Bill became a transformed person,” said Morris. “He started his days praying in the chapel. Others sought him out for advice. He even took how-to classes on feeding others so he could help a female World War II Veteran who could not feed herself.”

By the time he died, Bill had reconciled with his mother and three sisters, with whom he had not spoken in 25 years. One of Bill’s sisters angrily approached Morris at the Veteran’s funeral.

“You showed us a Bill we had never known, and we had him for only two months,” she told Morris. Her words revealed that Bill and his family had found peace of mind. It was a good death.

“End-of-life care is often a business of relationships, and a good part of that is helping Veterans reconcile with the people in their lives,” Morris said. “We’re always working toward peace of mind through reconciliation, and the good death that follows.”

To speak with a chaplain or to learn more about available services, call 412-822-1551.
FOCUS ON WOMEN’S HEALTH

Healing Together

Army Veteran Dewanna Thornton turned to yoga when she wanted to try something other than medication to alleviate pain.

“My legs started to hurt in Afghanistan, and now all of my joints and bones hurt,” said Thornton as she performed warm-up exercises prior to a yoga class at VA Pittsburgh’s Women’s Health Clinic in Oakland. “I want to get back to the me I once was, and yoga, with the breathing and being mindful of all that’s going on around you, really helps.”

Margie Muldoon, a VA Pittsburgh nurse practitioner and certified yoga instructor, teaches the weekly women-only Gentle Yoga classes. She said yoga eases pain through meditation and increased mobility. “Pain becomes more generalized when you’re less mobile,” Muldoon said. “When you improve mobility and your sense of balance and learn to meditate, you can have less pain.”

For Thornton and Air Force combat Veteran Samantha Chero, the yoga classes also serve another purpose: They are a nonjudgmental gathering place for women Veterans. “Being around Veterans is more comforting because we understand each other on a level most individuals will never see,” said Chero, an OEF/OIF Veteran.

To learn more about gentle yoga, email margaret.muldoon@va.gov. For details on other women-only programs, email marlena.regus@va.gov.

Being around Veterans is more comforting because we understand each other on a level most individuals will never see.

Warm weather brings outdoor fun—and the threat of Lyme disease, a bacterial infection caused by the bite of the blacklegged deer tick.

Approximately one in three ticks in southwestern Pennsylvania harbor the bacteria that can cause Lyme disease. Wear long sleeve shirts and pants, avoid exposed skin and use insect spray with DEET for protection.

Ticks love warmth and often bite in the armpits and groin, behind the knees and at the hairline. Check those areas and shower when you return indoors to wash off small ticks that might not be visible.

Ticks must be attached for more than 24 hours to spread Lyme disease, so prompt removal with tweezers is critical. Signs of Lyme disease include a target or bullseye rash at the bite and fever, chills, severe headache and joint pain.

Treatments are available if you test positive for Lyme, but the best medicine is prevention: When you go out, don’t forget the bug spray.

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/lyme
Q. I have a VA disability rating, but I choose not to receive medical care through VA. Am I still eligible for VA pharmacy benefits?
A. To be eligible for pharmacy benefits, Veterans must receive their medical care through VA or have authorization for non-VA care. VA Pittsburgh’s pharmacy will fill prescriptions written by VA doctors for eligible Veterans. Under certain circumstances (VA Aid and Attendance or Housebound benefits), VA will fill prescriptions signed by non-VA physicians after the Veteran completes VA Form FL-10-483, Request for Outpatient Treatment or Drugs and Medicines.

Q. Who qualifies for VA transportation and what programs are available?
A. VA offers eligible Veterans a number of different transportation options, including Special Mode Transportation, Veterans Transportation System and Disabled American Veterans Transportation Network. Each program has different eligibility guidelines. For more information or to see if you qualify for these or other programs, call the travel office at 412-360-3620 or 412-360-6783.

Q. How is VA dental eligibility determined?
A. VA dental eligibility is determined differently from medical eligibility, with the scope of care dependent on each Veteran’s circumstances. Some Veterans, including former prisoners of war, are eligible for any needed dental care. Others, such as homeless Veterans receiving VA care, are typically eligible for a one-time course of medically necessary dental care. For more information, contact VA at 1-877-222-VETS (8387) or www.va.gov/healthbenefits.

Q. I am a Veteran, but I am not eligible for a Veteran Health Identification photo ID card. Can I obtain a photo Veterans ID card from VA to prove my military service to businesses that offer Veterans discounts?
A. Not at this time, but VA is in the process of complying with the Veterans Identification Card Act, which will allow Veterans to obtain, for a small fee, a federal Veterans ID card.
The Beaver County VA Outpatient Clinic is moving from its current location in Monaca three miles away to a new location on Brighton Avenue in Rochester. The relocated clinic is larger, has ample parking and is on the public bus route. We will contact clinic patients by mail with full details prior to the move or their next appointment.