



# Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs *Good News*



Volume 2 Issue 6

**Welcome to Good News. This Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) newsletter highlights the accomplishments and sharing activities at both the local and national levels.**

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### **Implementation of New Symptom Codes for Traumatic Brain Injury**

Over the past year, the VA and the DoD have championed the establishment of a new series code that allows health care providers to code symptoms following Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) accurately, as mandated by Congress. On October 1, 2009, the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) released the first phase of a series of improvements to the International Classification of Diseases, 9th Revision, Clinical Modification (ICD-9-CM), Volumes 1 and 2. These improvements include new codes for signs and symptoms of emotional states such as irritability, emotional instability, and impulsiveness; a new code for personal history of TBI, and a new code for TBI screening. In the past, providers did not have separate codes for classifying some of the common consequences of TBI such as emotional/behavioral and cognitive disorders and had to resort to using generic mental health diagnosis codes. The intent of the new symptoms codes is to allow health care practitioners to identify more accurately the conditions of service members, and further assist in the collection of data on those who have been diagnosed and treated for this injury.

DoD and VA are currently working with NCHS on the second phase of code improvements, including new symptoms codes for cognitive and memory deficits associated with TBI.

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### **DoD and VA Announce Disability Evaluation System Pilot Expansion**

DoD and VA have announced that beginning in January 2010, the Disability Evaluation System (DES) pilot will expand to an additional six installations across the country.

The new locations will include: Fort Benning, GA.; Fort Bragg, NC; Fort Hood, TX; Fort Lewis, VA; Fort Riley, KS; and Portsmouth Naval Medical Center, VA. This expansion brings the total number of military facilities using the pilot to 27.

“The decision to expand the pilot was based upon favorable reviews focusing on the program’s ability to meet timeliness, effectiveness, transparency, and customer and stakeholder

satisfaction,” said Noel Koch, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, Office of Wounded Warrior Care and Transition Policy.

In November 2007, DoD and VA implemented the pilot test for disability cases originating at the three major military treatment facilities in the national capital region. The pilot is a test of a new process design eliminating the duplicative, time-consuming, and often confusing elements of the two current disability processes of the Departments. Key features of the DES pilot include one medical examination and a single-sourced disability rating. To date, more than 5,431 service members have participated in the pilot since November 2007.

“Streamlining our disability claims system and working closely with DoD to care for today’s generation of heroes are among VA’s top priorities,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “We will never lose sight of the fact that veterans and military personnel have earned their benefits from VA and DoD by virtue of their service to the nation.”

In October 2008, DoD and VA approved expansion of the DES pilot to 18 sites beyond the three initial national capital region sites. This process was successfully completed on May 31, 2009. The estimated completion date for the new six site expansion is scheduled for March 31, 2010.

“This expansion encompasses an additional 20 percent of total service member population enrolled in the program to achieve 47 percent overall enrollments, which will allow us to gather and evaluate data from a diverse geographic area, prior to determining worldwide implementation,” said Koch.

The pilot was authorized by the National Defense Authorization Act of fiscal year 2008 and stems from the recommendations from the reports of the Task Force on Returning Global War on Terrorism Heroes, the Independent Review Group, the President’s Commission on Care for America’s Returning Wounded Warriors (the Dole/Shalala Commission), and the Commission on Veterans’ Disability Benefits.

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### **DoD/VA Improve Transparency in Rating Disabilities**

As part of a big shift toward interagency transparency, the third Joint DoD/VA Training on the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities was held in Falls Church, VA in August 2009. The training was provided by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and hosted by the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Health Affairs (OASD (HA)), Clinical and Program Policy. The training initiated in April 2008 and has been held semi-annually. Approximately 65 DoD frontline adjudicators from the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines and Coast Guard Physical Evaluation Boards (PEB); Physical Disability Board of Review (PDBR); physicians participating in the Medical Evaluation Board (MEB); and DoD legal staff have received the interagency training.

The information and experience gained from the trainings improves the consistency of the two Departments in applying the veteran-based schedule to active duty and reserve component members. Ms. Joyce Hamel, Esq., a recent attendee from the Office of the Soldiers’ Counsel, said that she was “very impressed with the knowledge and ability of the [VA] trainers for this

course. Without exception, all attorneys that attended learned a great deal and felt that the course would benefit MEB Outreach Counsel, particularly since they are seeing clients in the early stages". The training provides a unique opportunity for the VA and DoD to discuss the similarities and differences when applying rating disabilities in the two disability compensations systems. Further, this collaborative venture is a critical step toward future opportunities to share knowledge and expertise across the agencies.

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### **DoD and VA Grand Rounds: A Success Story**

The Grand Rounds program, initiated under the VA/DoD Health Executive Council Continuing Education and Training Work Group and implemented by the VA Employee Education System (EES), has celebrated its first anniversary. This ground-breaking program provides distance learning strategies to present in-service training and continuing education to VA and DoD service personnel. Grand rounds are a recognized method of formal continuing medical education for physicians, and provide a virtual means of sharing training between VA and the Military Departments for continued medical education credits.

One site that has seen success under this program is Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC). The Southern Regional Medical Command, BAMC, and EES jointly sponsor a monthly TBI Grand Rounds Program. The objective of this program is to provide the audience with knowledge of evidence-based care and treatment of concussive injuries in service members and/or veterans. Common co-morbidities and complications are also routinely discussed. Both the subject topics and the speakers are drawn from a variety of disciplines, including medicine, psychology, epidemiology, rehabilitation therapies, and ethics to reflect the multidisciplinary nature of concussion treatment and the target audience for the lecture series. The speakers are widely recognized as authorities in their respective fields, and include subject matter experts from VA, DoD, and academia. Each lecture in the series is one hour with time afterward for questions. The lecture takes place at BAMC in San Antonio, TX, with video-teleconferencing and audio bridges made available in VA and DoD facilities throughout the country, as well as selected academic centers.

The Grand Rounds project continues to see success and has expanded their scope by taping material briefed at conferences for deployment, such as the Veterans Health Affairs Amputee Conference and DoD Force Health Protection conference. DoD staff can access archived sessions and receive continuing education credit via the Military Health System's Learning Management System, MHS Learn. Thirteen Grand Rounds lectures are currently available with topics added on a quarterly basis.

To review the current titles please login to the MHS Learn site at <https://mhslearn.csd.disa.mil> via the 'MHS Staff Training' tab and look for the 'Grand Rounds' course catalog located on the My Learning page or by key word 'Grand Rounds'.

**For questions please contact the appropriate point of contact below.**

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If you have any good news stories and or accomplishments from your local teams, please send them to Maura Brady at [maura.brady.ctr@tma.osd.mil](mailto:maura.brady.ctr@tma.osd.mil) and your stories may be included in a future issue of the newsletter.

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