Perspective from
Department of Veterans Affairs

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TO CARE FOR HIM WHO SHALL
HAVE BORNE THE BATTLE AND
FOR HIS WIDOW, AND HIS ORPHAN
A. LINCOLN
Relevance of Study to VA

- Why is this study important to VA?
- What is the state of hearing health care within the VA?
- What are VA’s expectations for the study?
1. Hearing loss is a recognized public health problem that interferes with communication and negatively impacts Veterans in their jobs, personal quality of life, and in their ability to live and function independently.

2. Hearing loss and tinnitus are the most prevalent causes of service-connected disability for all Veterans.
   - Noise-induced hearing loss is the leading occupational health injury in military service, across all branches of service and military occupations.
   - In FY2013, 2,116,528 Veterans received compensation for auditory disorders (13.1% of all military service-connected disabilities).

3. Hearing loss and tinnitus is not only an age-related disorder, but impacts Veterans across all ages/eras of service (WWII - OEF/OIF).
4. Hearing health services is part of VA’s comprehensive health benefits package

5. Veterans rely heavily upon VA for hearing services in order to:
   – Receive comprehensive hearing health services that are generally not available through most other health plans, and
   – Avoid fragmented care and high costs that currently limit access in the private sector

6. In FY2014, VA audiologists provided services to more than 903,000 Veterans (5.8 % increase over FY2013), and issued almost 800,000 hearing aids
Importance of Study to Veterans

VA Compensation Trends for Auditory Disorders

- Hearing Loss
- Tinnitus
VA Expectations for Study

1. Increase public awareness: US hearing health care recognizes early identification (newborn screening) and provides limited services to children, but is generally lacking with regard to hearing care and provision of services needed for adult hearing loss

2. Hearing health services (separate from devices) – needed to assess hearing, identify disorders, and fit the most appropriate technology, or refer for other medical treatment – should be recognized and covered
   - 22M US Veterans, of which 9.1M are enrolled in VA health care
   - 13M Veterans obtain health care elsewhere and need coverage for comparable services

3. Federal regulations should be optimized to ensure consumers are appropriately protected, while allowing and regulating safe access for commercially available technologies
In 1996, VA began the creation of Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) to transform VA Health Care from a “Hospital System” into the largest integrated “Health Care System” in US (21 regional networks)

1,018 Outpatient Services Sites:
- 14 Health Care Centers
- 186 Multi-Specialty Community Based Outpatient Clinics
- 562 Primary Care Community Based Outpatient Clinics
- 256 Other Outpatient Services Sites

167 Medical Centers
- 2 Stand-Alone Extended Care Sites
- 9 Stand-Alone Residential Care Sites

300 Vet Centers
70 Mobile Vet Centers
Veterans receive comprehensive hearing health care through VA audiology services, including:

• Disability audiology exams for Veterans and Servicemembers, and medical opinions re: relationship between military service and hearing loss, tinnitus, and balance disorders

• Assessment, evaluation, treatment, and/or management of hearing loss, tinnitus, and balance disorders

• Fitting and programming hearing aids and other assistive listening devices (e.g., TV and telephone amplifiers), and post-surgical rehabilitation for cochlear and other bioelectric auditory implants

• Hearing screening and prevention services; auditory rehabilitation services to optimize residual hearing
Access to VA Audiology Services

- Audiology is one of the highest demand services in VA; nearly half of all patients awaiting care in VA are for audiology services.
- Audiology functions as member of integrated health care teams within VA, partnering with Primary Care, Otolaryngology, Neurology, Geriatrics, and other professional disciplines providing high demand services required by Veterans.
- Access to audiology services are managed through 455 VA clinical sites of care, and 132 sites with Tele-Audiology capability.
- VA Community Care is also utilized to expand availability and improve timely access to Audiology services (e.g., purchased community care contracts, Choice Act).
Access to VA Audiology Services

FY2015:
- 1,161 clinical audiologists (7.8% increase over FY2013)
- Most VA audiologists are trained with a doctoral degree (e.g., AuD, PhD), and all are required to maintain a state license
- 344 audiology assistants (9.5% increase over FY2013)

FY 2014:
- 903,075 unique Veterans received Audiology services; 52,138 new Veterans (+5.8% over FY2013)
- Over 16K Tele-Audiology encounters (+59% over FY2013)
What is good for public health overall is good for Veterans and VA

• VA can serve as a model for comprehensive hearing health care
• VA utilizes a patient-centered, integrated team approach to care that includes audiologists as licensed, independent providers
• VA utilizes evidence-based, best clinical practices in its delivery of audiology services
• VA continually evaluates emerging technologies, and integrates new innovative technologies into its continuum of services
• VA strives to make hearing health care as inclusive (from prevention → treatment), widely available, and accessible as possible