



On The Beat

Minneapolis VA Health Care System
July/August 2012



900 Veterans Attend Annual Stand Down

The 2nd annual Stand Down at the Boy Scout Base camp Aug 1-2 was hosted by the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV) with support of the Minneapolis VA and other state, federal and local organizations. The medical center offered medical, dental and eye screenings as well as information from OEF/OIF and Suicide Prevention staff. At right, Army veteran Bernard Harmon and wife Janice. For story and more photos, see page 2.



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Stand Down Brings Vets Together for 2 Days



OEF/OIF Manager Mark Frenzel



Jimmy Collier, regional program director, MACV

Minneapolis VA provided 214 Veterans with medical, dental and optometry examinations during the annual Stand Down in early August. “The event is crucial to showing our Veterans our support and, for some, it may have been their first VA healthcare experience,” said David Adriansen, the Minneapolis VA Simulation Center Manager, who coordinated the VA participation. “My best experience was meeting a WW II Veteran who was not enrolled in the VA system. He, and 14 other Veterans, were enrolled at the site and now can enjoy benefits they didn’t know existed for them.” Not all of the attendees were homeless. Some said they attended to learn about benefits.



VA dentist Dr. John Ofstehage



VA optometry technician Gavin Thorsrud

VISN23 Deputy to Serve as Minneapolis VA's Acting Director



Johnson-Mekota

As of September 1, **Judy Johnson-Mekota**, Deputy Network Director (DND) for the VA Midwest Health Care Network (VISN 23), will serve as Acting Director of the Minneapolis VA Health Care System as of Sept. 1. She replaces Barry Sharp who has served as acting medical director since January 2012. Sharp is returning to his position as director of the Iowa City VA. Ms. Johnson-Mekota received her undergraduate degree in Nursing from Coe College, and her Master of Nursing Administration from the

University of Iowa. After gaining health care experience in the private sector, she began her career with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in 1992 as a nurse manager of a Coronary Care unit. She has held several positions of increasing responsibility within VA, to include the Administrative Officer/Chief of Staff at the Iowa City VA Medical Center from 2001-2007. During her tenure as Administrative Officer, she served details as Acting Associate Director at the Iowa City, Iowa and Fargo, North Dakota VA Medical Centers. She is a graduate of the Veterans Health Administration Health Care Leadership Institute. Ms. Johnson-Mekota is a certified VHA mentor, maintains membership in the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, and is board certified as a Fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives.

New Associate Director Joins Minneapolis Executive Team



Stalhandske

Erik Stalhandske is the new Associate Director of the Minneapolis VA Health Care System. Stalhandske has a BA in Political Science, and two graduate degrees: a Masters in Public Policy and a Masters of Health Services Administration. He completed the VA Senior Executive Service Development Program, and then served as the Interim Associate Director at the VA North Texas Health Care System in Dallas, a facility with over 4,500 employees, six outpatient clinics and an \$800 million budget. He was the Interim Assistant Director at the Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center, a facility with over 4,000

employees and a budget of \$600 million, as well as the Interim Associate Director at the Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center in Saginaw, Michigan. Stalhandske has diverse and valuable experience which includes Program Manager for the Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for Patient Safety, Interim Program Manager for the VA National Mental Health Homeless Program in Washington, DC, and the Assistant Financial Manager at the Great Lakes Region Department of Veterans Affairs.

Clyde Markon, MD, has been named medical director of the Minneapolis VA Health Care System's network of outreach clinics in Minnesota and western Wisconsin. Previously, Dr. Markon served as medical director of the VA's Twin Ports Outpatient Clinic in Superior, Wi. An internist with special training in nephrology (kidney disease), Dr. Markon is a graduate of the Emory University School of Medicine.



Strom

Erik Strom, MD, has been named Director of the Minneapolis VA's Imaging Patient Service Line (PSL). He joined the Minneapolis VA in December 2008. Previously, he was in private practice in California for 35 years. During the past three years, he has served on the VISN 23 Imaging service line leadership group, with primary responsibilities for setting up and staffing a "virtual radiology" program for the remote reading of imaging studies from other VISN 23 facilities.

Mark Rosenberg, MD, Chief of Medicine and Director of Primary and Specialty Medicine at the Minneapolis VA since 2009, is leaving to become Medical School's Vice Dean for Education at the University of Minnesota on October 1.

A Great Day for a Paint-a-Thon



Minneapolis VA's participation in the 26th annual Twin Cities Paint-a-thon on July 28 began with these words of advice from VA painter Tim Johnson. "For anyone who is on the roof, beware of the wires!" And the work began at the south Minneapolis home of an Army veteran, Diane. "I can't thank you enough for doing this," she told the volunteers. "There is no way I could have done this on my own." For the next 6 hours, about 30 VA employees and several of their children put a new shine on the two-story stucco house. Donna Paal of OEF/OIF program organized the event.

Minneapolis VA-Led Study Finds Observation as Effective as Surgery in Early Prostate Cancer



A major study led by the Department of Veterans Affairs found no difference in survival between men with early-stage prostate cancer who had their prostate surgically removed and those who were simply watched by their doctors, with treatment only as needed to address symptoms if they occurred. The findings appeared in the July 19 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.



"Our data show that observation provides equivalent length of life, with no difference in death from prostate cancer, and avoids the harms of early surgical treatment," said lead author Dr. Timothy Wilt, MD, of the Center for Chronic Disease Outcomes Research at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center, and the University of Minnesota.

Known as the Prostate Cancer Intervention Versus Observation Trial, or PIVOT, the study was conducted and by VA's Cooperative Studies Program. The randomized trial involved 731 men and took place at 44 VA sites and eight academic medical centers nationwide. Eligible trial participants voluntarily agreed beforehand that to take part in the study they would be randomly assigned to one treatment or the other.

The first trial group had a radical prostatectomy—surgical removal of the walnut-sized prostate. Surgery is generally performed in the belief it can lower the risk of prostate cancer spreading and causing death. Evidence had been lacking as to the treatment's effectiveness, especially for men whose cancer was initially detected only on the basis of a blood test—the prostate specific antigen (PSA) test. In most cases, these tumors are not large enough to be felt during a doctor's exam and do not cause any symptoms.

The second trial group was the "observation group." In this approach, physicians generally do not provide immediate surgical or radiation therapy. Rather, they carefully follow men and provide treatments aimed at relieving symptoms, such as painful or difficult urination, if and when the cancer progresses and causes bothersome health problems.

The trial followed patients between eight and 15 years. When Wilt and colleagues analyzed the results, they found no difference in death rates between the two groups, either from any cause whatsoever or specifically from prostate cancer. In terms of quality of life for men in the study, the surgery group experienced nearly double the rate of erectile dysfunction—81 percent versus 44 percent—and roughly three times the rate of urinary incontinence—17 percent versus 6 percent.

While PIVOT found no difference in overall mortality or prostate cancer deaths between the two groups for men who had cancers with a PSA value of 10 or less, the authors say there may be a survival benefit to surgery for men with PSA scores above 10, or other clinical results indicating more aggressive, higher-risk tumors. Prostate cancer is usually slow-growing, and most men with PSA-detected prostate cancer do not die from the disease or develop health problems related to it, even if it is not treated with surgery or radiation.

For a New Generation of Cancer Drugs, VA Scientists Look to Nanomedicine



A team at the Minneapolis VA and the University of Minnesota, including (L-R) Drs. Khalil Ahmed, Gretchen Unger, and Janeen Trembley, are working on a targeted approach to kill cancer cells without harming normal tissue.

Chemotherapy for cancer has saved many lives. But at the same time, the treatment has a serious drawback: It can be toxic to healthy cells along with cancerous ones. That can cause short-term side effects that make treatment difficult to tolerate, such as hair loss, mouth sores, and anemia. And even when chemotherapy succeeds in curing cancer, it can leave in its wake permanent "collateral damage" such as sterility and a weakened immune system.

For years, scientists have been in hot pursuit of what they see as a way to overcome the challenge: "smart" chemotherapy that zaps bad cells without harming good ones.

A team at the Minneapolis VA Health Care System and the University of Minnesota is developing a form of smart chemotherapy they think holds special promise. It relies on a capsule so small that 40,000 of them could fit on the head of a pin. Both the capsule and the drug inside it are designed to home in only on cancer cells.

"[Our] concept is completely different than what's out there in the literature and what's being pursued in many labs," says lead investigator Khalil Ahmed, PhD, a VAMC scientist.

The ultra-tiny capsule, or nanocapsule, is less than 50 nanometers in diameter (a nanometer is a billionth of a meter). It's the product of a collaborating lab, that of Gretchen Unger, PhD. A consultant to VA, Unger is also the founder and chief scientific officer of a Minnesota company called GeneSegues, which is now making the capsules for research. Unlike capsules you buy at the drug store or vitamin shop, this one is invisible to the naked eye. Rather than being taken orally, the microscopic capsules would be suspended in a solution and given to patients intravenously.

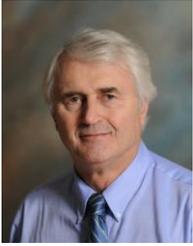
GeneSegues formulates the capsules in test tubes from a natural protein, or biopolymer. In lab experiments, the polymer breaks down within a few hours of entering a cell membrane. The cargo inside—a drug—is then freed to do its job in the cell nucleus. The capsules enter cells through the "lipid raft" pathway. Lipid rafts are cholesterol-rich structures in cell membranes. They manage the traffic of proteins and other molecules into and out of the cell.

The nanocapsules act like commandos that slink past guards at a tightly controlled checkpoint, headed to their target. Because of their ultra-tiny size, the capsules slip through cell membranes without setting off immune responses that could degrade the capsule or its payload on the way to the nucleus. There's another plus to the capsule: The protein from which it's made can be changed based on the target. Ahmed's studies use a capsule made from tenfibgen, derived from a larger protein called tenascin.

Importantly, tenascin receptors are abundant in the membranes of cancer cells. The capsules are drawn to them like heat-seeking missiles.

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VA Honors Dr. Niewoehner with Barnwell Research Award



Dr. Niewoehner

Minneapolis VA's **Dennis Niewoehner, M.D.**, is the recipient of the 2012 John B. Barnwell Award, presented by the Clinical Science Research & Development (CSR&D) division of the VA Office of Research and Development. This award for outstanding achievement in clinical research is CSR&D's highest honor for scientific achievement. The award recognizes Dr. Niewoehner's exemplary record of involvement in, and service to the VA and to the clinical profession, as well as his seminal contributions to our understanding of the pathophysiology and treatment of patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. According to the VA announcement, "His work has had a broad impact on the clinical care of Veterans and the population at large." The award was established in 2007 to honor John Blair Barnwell, M.D., distinguished educator and physician-scientist, who was Director of Research and Education at the VA Central Office in the 1940s. Barnwell pioneered tuberculosis treatment research following World War II.



MacLennan: Outstanding Nurse Award

Mpls. St. Paul Magazine asked doctors, nurses, and patients to recommend nurses who go above and beyond the call of duty in all areas of health care. Their judges reviewed nearly 100 nominations looking at professionalism, bedside manner and patient interaction, credentials and experience, and impact on organization. They narrowed down the nominations to highlight the top 20 winners.

Diane MacLennan RN, a TBI/Polytrauma nurse case manager from the Minneapolis VA Health Care System, was selected as one of 20 winners in the 2012 inaugural Outstanding Nurses Awards. She is an outpatient nurse case manager focusing on rehabilitation

nursing case management with Veteran and active-duty patients that have traumatic brain injury and polytrauma. In her words, Diane describes what it's like being a nurse, "I like to think of nurses as the glue that holds health care together. Nurse case managers use a lot of glue." Diane and the other winners were honored in a ceremony and appear in a write up in the August issue of the magazine.

Former Minneapolis VAHCS Director **Steve Kleinglass** was one of two VA senior executives to receive a Presidential Distinguished Executive award in April. Only 54 senior executives from all of the federal government received the leadership award. Recipients are selected because they are "strong leaders, professionals, and scientists who achieve results and consistently demonstrate strength, integrity, industry and a relentless commitment to excellence in public service."

The resident staff from the University of Minnesota Department of Radiology has honored **Howard Ansel, MD**, of the Minneapolis VA, as "Teacher of the Year" and presented him with a beautiful plaque. The presentation was made by the Graduate Education Committee during July based on comments from residents. Dr. Ansel specializes with in abdominal imaging, cardiovascular radiology, interventional radiology and thoracic radiology.

Virginia Nitardy Has Served Vets for 50 Years . . . And She Has No Plans to Stop Now!

When Virginia “Ginny” Nitardy began working at the Minneapolis VA in 1957, all lab tests were done manually. She averaged about 15 a day. Today, she said laboratory work is in the “space age.” She will soon turn 81 years of age and has no plans to retire. “I enjoy my work and I enjoy the people I work with,” she told medical center leadership during a recent meeting where she was honored with both a plaque and personal letter signed by VA undersecretary for health Robert Petzel, M.D., who did a rotation in the Minneapolis VA laboratory while he was in medical school.



Ginny Nitardy is pictured with Dr. Steve Ewing (L), head of laboratory services, and acting medical center director Barry Sharp.

Milestones – Congratulations!

<p>40 YEARS Carla L. Benson Rita G. Fogarty Nadine M. Steele Valarie J. Wesley</p> <p>35 YEARS Kathy A. Thees Verlain R. Soulier Susan M. Stickney Catherine Niewoehner</p> <p>30 YEARS Diane J. Cole Beverly K.Foss Daniel W. Devereaux Anna E. Schorer, MD Dennis J. Knapp, Richard G. Charboneau Randy W.B arse Vicki L. Young Kimberle R. Fischbach Hanna E. Bloomfield, MD</p>	<p>25 YEARS Suzanne K Anderson Steven H Kirchner Christopher A. Walzel Teresa A. Kullman Darlene M. Dewaay Debra Hodnett Walke Patricia C. Johnson Susan M Roberts Sean M. Nugent Mattie A. Pratt John R. McCarten, MD Amy K. Anderson Maryruth E. Byboth Patricia A. Hutchison Kathleen E Johns Paul D. Anderson Susan R. Jacobson Sharon L. Stanke James P. Cleary Julie A. Burbank James S. Babb David A. Rottenberg</p>	<p>25 YEARS Thomas T. Pederson Mark O. West Brett A Larson Hall, Doris J. Jan R. Fitzpatrick Betty W. Darnell</p> <p>20 YEARS Denise V Mitrenga, Joe D. McGuire Markus Gapany Sandra J. Tonia</p> <p>15 YEARS Theresia A. Mehren Fred G Ernst Debra L. Ross Nina L. Pagel Pamela J. Nelson Robin F. Ring Amy M. Magras</p>	<p>10 YEARS Wonhi L. Salzer Elizabeth Latts Mackenzi Mbai Glennon K. Park Eva J. Holts Karen H. Ashe, MD Aaron M. Penn Paul T. Harper Brenda K. Hamilton Laura A. Pruett Dawn M. Bleske Joseph L. Kyles Raymond F Cranston Ellen Gunderson Beth A. Gustafson Barbara Frechette Herbert D. Stockley Dennis Wawracz Mary A. Johnson Rebecca A. Indahl Bobbi Nash Earl G. Books</p>
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Around the Minneapolis VA



Marine Muster – On Saturday, June 23, more than 500 Marines on reserve status visited the Minneapolis VA for presentations. In photo at left, VA's suicide prevention coordinator Lindy Fortin briefs Major General Tracy L. Garrett, Commanding General, Marine Force Headquarters Group, and her aide. At right, Marines receive info at OEF/OIF booth.

Community Resource and Referral Center Opens - A dedication event will be Sept. 17 at 10 a.m. followed by guided tours until 2 p.m. The center is located at 1207 Harmon Place, downtown Minneapolis. The center will provide social services, benefits counseling, mental health rehabilitation and primary care. The center has a multipurpose room, community and group rooms, showers, laundry and a computer lab. In addition to housing 30 VA staff, local community partners will have office space in the center.

Parking Garage Construction Update - Minneapolis VA is still hopeful that ground will be broken this fall for an enclosed parking garage to be located in front of the medical center. The multi-story garage will contain 400 spaces for patient parking with a covered walkway to the medical center on ground level. The solicitation for bids has been posted on www.fbo.gov with a response deadline of September 17, 2012. During construction, more than 200 surface lot spaces will be vacated. VA staff have been encouraged to use alternative transportation systems (car pool, van pool, public transportation, bicycling).

Nanomedicine Research – Continued From Page 6. "The concept is to target a receptor [a protein on the surface of cells that acts like a molecular docking site] that's elevated in cancer cells but that is not present in normal cells," says Ahmed. Another plus of the nanocapsule is that it is able to penetrate tumor cells within organs, such as the prostate, as well as in areas of the body to which cancer has spread, such as lymph nodes or bone. That's an important factor, says Ahmed. "A particularly serious problem in cancer therapy is dealing with metastases, as they are difficult to target." **REPRINTED FROM VA RESEARCH CURRENTS, AUG 2012.**

VA Employee Appreciation Day Event



Obed Keanaaina (Obie) of Nutrition Food Service



Rec therapists Shannan Anderson, Laura Barrett & Michelle Patterson.



Josh Hill, Erik Berge and Bob Riley of Engineering



VISN23 staffers Shanna Vagts & Kyle Brewer



Staffers move through line for serving of "walking taco"



Nurse Executive Helen Pearlman and Chief of Staff Kent Crossley welcome staff