



Minneapolis VA Health Care System

ON THE BEAT

Animal Assisted Therapy

*Specially trained dogs
help Veterans heal
at the Minneapolis VA
Medical Center*

March/April 2012

Dogs Are Here to Help Veterans Heal

In August 2011, Army veteran Ray Nevala was working in his vegetable garden behind his home in Aurora, MN, when he tripped, fell backward and broke his spinal cord.

For more than two hours, he laid between rows of carrots and green beans, staring at the sky, in 90-degree heat.

“I learned a lesson in the Army. Don’t panic!” Ray said. “When you’re in danger, stay calm.” But time was running out as the sun beamed down. Ray was able to grab a carrot and sucked enough moisture from the vegetable to keep him hydrated.



Then he heard a neighbor’s car door slam. And a few minutes later, a Doberman Pincher (trained as a service dog) was staring down at Ray. The neighbors soon followed. “No question about it,” said Ray. “That dog saved my life.”

Today, Ray is recovering from spinal cord surgery in the Minneapolis VA Spinal Cord Injury & Disorder (SCI/D) Center. And he credits another dog – Jäger – for helping him get his life back!

Once a week, VA volunteers Jäger and his master Dee Dee Grant spend 30 minutes with Ray working through a series of exercises designed to improve Ray’s arm and upper body strength. “Ray is building muscle by rubbing, touching and reaching out to the animal,” explained Occupational Therapist Mike Sebeck. “The goal of occupational therapy is to use everyday activity as therapy.”

The idea of using Jäger in Ray’s rehab program began a few months ago when a therapist was escorting Ray down the hospital hallway and he stopped his wheelchair and reached out to touch Jäger. It was the first time that Ray had moved his arm to that degree since spinal cord surgery.

Recreation therapist Janelle Gustafson, who works on the SCI/D Center, believed that a formalized program of animal assisted therapy or AAT might be a good way to help enhance Ray’s recovery. “We view recreation therapy as a way to improve function,” Gustafson said.

Clearly, Jäger enjoys his job. When Ms. Grant, puts on her khaki-vest and work pants at her home in Hudson, Wisconsin, Jäger knows exactly where he is headed. “He whines in the car until we get here,” she said.

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ON THE COVER: Jäger relaxes before start of a therapy session with Veteran Ray Nevala and occupational therapist Mike Sebeck. Photos by April Eilers. Article by Ralph Heussner.

Goal of Chronic Pain Initiative Is to Safeguard VA Patients

In the interest of patient safety, the Minneapolis VAHCS is taking a proactive approach to the prescribing of opioids for the treatment of chronic pain. In the U.S., someone dies every 19 minutes as a result of unintentional overdose of prescription drugs such as OxyContin. To address this public health issue, Minneapolis VA clinicians have begun efforts to transition patients from Oxycontin to safer opioids and to gradually reduce high-dose opioid prescriptions to lower and safer dosages. A task force of physicians, nurses, pharmacists and patient educators has been working on the initiative for more than a year. Implementation began in late January with a letter to all physicians from the Chief of Staff. Called the "Opioid Safety Initiative," the effort includes behavioral group programs for patients with chronic pain as well as individual education with providers and pharmacists. The selected patient population of this initiative are those patients with chronic pain. Complex cases will be reviewed by the opioid advisory committee that includes pain medicine, addiction psychiatry, pharmacy and psychologist specialists.



VA Observes Sexual Assault Awareness Month



April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, which provides VA an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to supporting Veterans who experienced military sexual trauma (MST). This year's national theme is "Military Sexual Trauma: Healing Starts with Knowing the Facts," to highlight the importance of VA staff being informed about MST.

Some key facts:

- About one in five women and one in a hundred men seen in VA medical facilities report that they experienced MST; that is, sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that occurred during military service.
- MST can affect veterans' physical and mental health many years afterwards.
- VA offers a variety of services designed to assist veterans who have experienced MST. For example, treatment for physical and mental health conditions related to MST is available at every VA facility and is provided to veterans free of charge, regardless of service-connection status. Veterans may be able to receive this free MST-related care even if they are not eligible for other VA care. Every VA facility also has an MST Coordinator who serves as a point of contact for veterans and staff.

It's important to remember that every VA employee has the power to help veterans recover from MST by responding sensitively to inquiries about MST, remaining knowledgeable about VA's MST-related services, and ensuring that information about veterans' MST status is kept confidential.

For more information, contact the Minneapolis VA MST Coordinator, **Linda Van Egeren PhD** at ext 1789 or visit the MST Resource homepage at <http://vawww.mst.va.gov>. Veterans can access information at www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp

MINNEAPOLIS VA CIVIL SERVANTS OF THE YEAR



Dr. Greg Rifleman
Chief, Podiatry - Dr. Rifleman is a fantastic physician with only the Veteran at heart. He

is very down to earth and talks to the vets like they are his neighbors. He is not intimidating to his patients and explains everything so the patients understand. The staff love working with him because he consistently gives them individualized, professional attention. When he says he is going to accomplish a duty it is done promptly and without error. The accuracy of his work is second to none and when he says he is available he absolutely is available and has only the veteran's interests in mind. Dr. Rifleman exemplifies the highest standards of ethics and professional service that we could ever expect in any organization.



Wendi Slattengren
Physical Therapist - Wendi Slattengren is a VA physical therapist. What

makes her truly outstanding is that she consistently takes that "extra step" without expecting anything in return other than knowing she did the right thing for her patients. She is sensitive to the reality that we are living in a time of diminishing resources and actively problem solves ways to bring innovation to PT services while engaging her patients as true partners in their health care and helping them reach their personal goals. She has been a key innovator in our department, successfully implementing new programming in integrated medicine. In addition, she is a volunteer at her children's school and participates regularly in community service projects.



Heather Cseresznye
Fee Unit Team Lead - Heather's leadership played a critical role in the success of the non-VA Fee

department. The department began FY11 by paying 90.6% claims in 30 days or less but improved to 96.7% by year's end. Backlogged claims went from 7,739 (24.9% end of month inventory) to 877 (3.6%) by year's end. She was able to accomplish this primarily through productivity standards to monitor the performance of all fee clerks. The standards were developed jointly with AFGE and implemented on October 1, 2010. This resulted in cost savings of over \$112,000 in reduced overtime. These significant accomplishments improved customer satisfaction, decreased interest payments by 80%, and provided employees with clear and attainable objectives and continuous feedback.



Mike Reckard
Social Worker - In 2011, Mr. Reckard became the Caregiver Support Coordinator. He has played an intricate part in

developing the Caregiver Support Program. One noteworthy contribution this past year was his hard work and dedication in putting together the Caregiver Support Day - a day of resources and support for caregivers, which included VA resources and programs, but also resources on the local and national level. Mike continues his superior professional skills while working with families and veterans from all eras, even though the main part of his program is geared towards Post 911 veterans. You would never know the difference in who he is working with, as he treats all with the highest regard and respect, going above and beyond his role as the Caregiver Support Coordinator.



Sid Bell
Supervisory Supply Manager- Sidney Bell exemplifies the core values of the Minneapolis VA. He works with

integrity, he is committed to providing the best care available to Veterans, and he is always polite, professional, and pleasant. He is an advocate both for our patients and caregivers; he is respectful in all his interactions with those who work with him, and the outcome is excellent customer service. His leadership played a critical role in the success of ordering & distribution of new mattresses for the entire hospital. Sid is always willing to go the extra mile to assist in the procurement of needed items to provide the best care for veterans. As a veteran himself, he knows the importance of the part he plays.



Beth Frederick
Supply Management Specialist- Beth has made tremendous achievements in the Sterile Processing Services. Starting

the year with a deficit of 30% in staffing, she initiated creative recruiting techniques to attract qualified individuals, and develop relationships with local schools. These initiatives brought her staff to 100%, and demonstrated several months with zero turnover. Her all-employee survey results were superior, showing not only tremendous improvement from previous year's satisfaction among staff, but topping out in 37 of 38 categories. SPS plans for safe, effective and timely processing of thousands of instruments with a defect rate of less than 1%.



Marci Collins
Interior Designer -
 Facilities engineering workhorse! She provides interior design on every major construction

project. She singlehandedly managed 13 projects totaling \$4.1+ million in FY11. She was lead project manager for re-design of Twin Ports Outpatient Clinic and a critical team member on the Ramsey Clinic project. She remediated asbestos and lead-based paint in 10 buildings and led the \$4 million project to design and construct variable acuity ward based on best practices. She designed the prosthetics renovation project, consisting of 6,000 square feet, and the dental clinic renovation that added six exam/surgical rooms. She serves on a national board that publishes interior design standards for VA.



Ted Johnson
Staff Nurse - Ted provides exceptional service as a registered nurse in the cardiology department. His thorough knowledge

of nursing demonstrates his skills by assisting Interventional Cardiologists during Percutaneous Angioplasty procedures. His calm nature during stressful situations embodies the highest standards enabling him to be a key player during emergency situations. He continues to work closely with the Cardiology staff to provide excellent care to our veterans during interventional and angioplasty procedures ensuring all safety measures are met. Ted is caring, compassionate and a sharing individual who always puts the safety of his patients ahead of anything else. He is always volunteering to help others when the need arises, and is known for his generosity by donating bakery goods for the Volunteers within the hospital during the holiday seasons.



Theresa Weber
Police Captain -
 Captain Weber is the model of professional behavior in all aspects of her job; she strives for excellence at work

at all times, as shown by her positive helpful approach and her rapid response time. She personifies Customer Service at the VAHCS. She approaches every situation, even the most hostile, with a calm demeanor. The very nature of her job is consistently at a high stress, requiring a high alert mentality. She is truly a professional in all of these situations, and she is able to instill a calming presence to any situation by creating the feeling of "everything is under control; we can relax now. Captain Theresa Weber is here." She is able to take control of these situations, and instill a safe and secure atmosphere.



Sarah Stansky
Medical Support Assistant - One of Sarah's major contributions has been the coordination of care when patients are referred from outside

our facility. Sarah has transformed our capacity to quickly and reliably get patients' outside records. Now, we are able to review patient records before the patient arrives, plan and schedule pre-visit testing, and make the veterans' visits more productive. This benefits veterans by improving timeliness and reliability of care and benefits the clinicians by allowing us to focus on clinical issues while she works behind the scenes to have all the administrative pieces in place. Somehow, Sarah has managed to do this all with the sunniest of dispositions, and she invariably is willing to accommodate special needs, turning the work around on a dime.



Dr. Anna Schorer
Medical Oncologist - Dr. Schorer has been involved in several improvement projects on the

local, regional and national level. She helped coordinate the Lung Cancer collaborative, which implemented cancer safety initiatives, E-Consults, and a charter for the Community of practice in oncology. She worked tirelessly as the Director of the national Field Advisory Committee to improve cancer care in the VA system. She oversees the training programs for residents and fellows in the hematology / oncology section and is involved in cancer survivorship. In addition, she remains an outstanding, caring and dedicated clinician; she provides exceptional care for her patient. Her enthusiasm and passion is unsurpassed.



Brian Walsh
Pipefitter - Brian is a Certified Pool Operator (CPO) and is responsible for the total operation of the SCI/D Therapy

pool. More than 12 tests must be performed every morning to assure the safety of patients and therapists. Brian used initiative and foresight this year as he volunteered to assist the manufacture's technician. He documented and learned valuable techniques and maintenance procedures. This improved routine up-keep, safety checks, and future budgets of the VA. A manufactures visit is a minimum of \$2500. I have seen him mentor and teach new employees these skills using patience and understanding, always thinking of the patients and VA's "I Care" Mission. His focus is always on being of service to his fellow veterans, whether they're patients, supervisor, or co-worker.



VA Research Observance - Minneapolis VA will celebrate national VA Research Week on April 25, with noon lectures in the auditorium and posters in the flag atrium 1-3 p.m. Lecturers will be **Khalil Ahmed, PhD**, "CK2 as Target for Cancer Therapy - a Malignant Cell-Directed Nanomedicine Approach" and **Scott R. Sponheim, PhD**, "Looking to the Brain for Answers: Clues to What Goes Wrong in Schizophrenia and Blast-Related Traumatic Brain Injury." The theme for this year's Research Week is "Caring for Veterans through Discovery and Collaboration."

Career Milestones – Congratulations!

<p>40 YEARS Gary D. Schabert</p> <p>35 YEARS Sharon M. Wilson Peggy A. Bryant Rene M. Labandz Jay C. Price Rebecca A. Peterson</p> <p>30 YEARS Patricia E. O'Brien Diane R. Kemp Lisa C. Loyas Barbara J. Lunz James P. Fautsch Deborah A. Root Connie L. Rowley</p>	<p>25 YEARS Janet E. Maki-Perry Lorelei J. Peschong Sara A. Otterness Margaret A. Smith Colleen M. Roberts Cynthia J. Bona Mirna Martinez Denise R. Kocher Thomas W. Pikal Ann E. Noren Kimberly R. McMonigal Christine M. Wratz Tim M. Yue Dr. Charles E. Dean Ruth Petrich James A. McDavitt Jeanne M. Laramy Barbara A. Aldeman Karen B. Lajambe Lori H. Sorenson</p>	<p>20 YEARS Lisa M. Langeslay Ellen M. Ziemke Stephanie I. Anderson Gina B. Donahue Sharon S. Bringewatt Jill M. Lange</p> <p>15 YEARS Christopher E. Sam Rose C. Collins Clifford T. Porter Emma M. Barry Robert M. Knight</p>	<p>10 YEARS Debra L. Condon Allen D. Brown Shawn R. Staples Terry R. Rep Thomas Crossley James C. Dahlager Marilyn A. Weis Dr. Julia Perry Joanna L. Lauber Daniel W. McCann Wondimu Deto William J. Murtha Jonathon E. Johnson Kurt E. Nordlund</p>
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JOIN US FOR A
2K WALK + ROLL

TO BENEFIT HOMELESS VETERANS AND
PROMOTE HEALTH + WELLNESS

MAY 16, 2012

New Tool Enhances Veterans' Access to Their VA Health Care

Veterans who receive primary care services in the Minneapolis VA Health Care System can now take advantage of a new way to communicate with their health care teams that's as fast as email, but completely safe and secure!

The new communication tool is called "Secure Messaging" and allows Veterans to communicate electronically with their primary care team in the Minneapolis VA Health Care System.



"Secure Messaging is a great communication tool for anything, but urgent communication," said **Brad Foley**, My Health eVet coordinator. "It is meant for routine communication such as questions about appointments, prescriptions or other non-urgent health care matters," Foley said. "We are also presently expanding Secure Messaging into other specialty care areas." He added that Secure Messaging helps Veterans avoid long hold times on the telephone or missed phone calls from their health care team.

To take advantage of Secure Messaging Veterans should create an account on My Health eVet (www.myhealth.va.gov), making sure to check both VA patient and Veteran when they register. Next, follow the In-Person Authentication link and complete the In-Person Authentication form.

VA Therapy Dogs Help Veterans Gain Strength and Heal (from Page 2)

Jäger, a 7 year-old German Shepherd, has been an AAT-certified animal for two and a half years. As he walks through the halls, patients and staff are immediately drawn to him. Grant, staff and other volunteers are quick to remind others that hand hygiene is required for petting and participation in all animal visits.

"We're protecting both patients and the dog from disease." Grant explained. "We must remember that he comes here to work, not to play."

Jäger and three other AAT dog teams have been part of interdisciplinary treatment teams on 4J through Recreation Therapy for about two years. Since December 2011, they have been working with veterans on SCI/D as well. Therapy dogs work with veterans who have sustained a traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury/disorder, amputation or stroke.

AAT is a goal-oriented therapy session, while other therapy dog visits are labeled Animal Assisted Activities. These visits are also for inpatients throughout the hospital, are less goal-focused, but achieve the goal of lifting spirits and brightening the day of patients. Both opportunities allow for petting, story-telling, reminiscing and socialization.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Since the writing of this article, Ray has completed his therapy and has returned to his home.

NEWS FROM VA CENTRAL OFFICE



VA Research Currents is produced 8-10 times per year by the VA Office of Research and Development. The newsletter provides stakeholders of VA research with news about research results, new initiatives, major awards, research funding, and other matters of interest. To be added to the print or email mailing list for *VA Research Currents*, email varesearchcurrents@va.gov or call 410-962-1800, x252.

VA Gulf War Task Force Report Released The VA has released the second in a series of annual reports from its Gulf War Veterans Illnesses Task Force, outlining how VA will address the concerns of Veterans deployed during the Gulf War of 1990-1991. The report is available on the Internet at www.va.gov/opa/publications/2011_GWVI-TF_Report.pdf.

Medical Forms Program to Support Faster Claims Processing In March, VA announced the release of 68 new forms that will help speed the processing of Veterans' disability compensation and pension claims. The new forms, called disability benefits questionnaires (DBQs), can be found at <http://benefits.va.gov/disabilityexams>.

Study: 'Mantram' Meditation Eases PTSD Researchers report promising results from a study of a simple meditation technique in which Veterans silently repeated a word or phrase that was spiritually meaningful to them. The technique lessened stress in nearly a third of patients, say researchers at the VA San Diego. Findings online in journal *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*. Veterans were first taught to silently repeat a "mantram" during nonstressful times throughout the day and before falling asleep.

Suicide Prevention: What Works? A team with VA's Evidence-Based Synthesis Program systematically reviewed scores of past studies to identify the most effective interventions and practices in suicide prevention in Veteran and military populations. Report appears on the Web at www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/suicide-interventions.cfm



Men, Women Equally Likely to Use VA Homeless Services Investigators with VA and Yale University found that male and female Veterans who use VA care are equally likely to access a VA homelessness program. They studied a national population of 445,319 Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who had at least one VA clinic visit between October 2001 and September 2009.

Research Roundtable Caps VA Celebration of Women's History Month Improving the health and health care of women Veterans is a high priority within the Department of Veterans Affairs, said a panel of leading researchers on March 27. VA women Veteran's health research focuses on:

- Returning combat women Veterans – gender differences with regard to PTSD, post-deployment behaviors, and reintegration;
- Understanding barriers and improving access to VA health care for women Veterans;
- Long-term health outcomes of women who served during the Vietnam era;
- Expanding mental health research including PTSD, substance abuse, and sexual trauma; and
- Basic research on breast cancer including hormones, genetics and autoimmune diseases.

Minneapolis VA News



VA Canteen Opens 2nd Starbucks

A second Starbucks' coffee/snack stand is open by the first floor waiting area by the outpatient entrance. Pictured at right are VA canteen staff Denise Pederson and Stacy Radcliff on the first day of operation.



Tee It Up for Troops Donates Golf Cart To Fisher Houses

Thanks to a donation, residents of the two Fisher Houses will be able to use a golf cart, driven by authorized volunteer drivers, to travel back and forth to the medical center. Barry Sharp, acting director, Minneapolis VAHCS, receives key to vehicle from Nancy Christopherson, executive director, Tee It Up for Troops, as VA and staff and donors look on.

VA Staff and Local Volunteers Help At Annual VA Winter Games

A group of Minneapolis ski instructors helped the VA at the winter games in Snowmass, Colorado, last month. Pictured (L-R, front row): Kory Hamel, Sr. Engineering Manager, Endo Health Solutions; Paula Dare, Educator, Elk River School District; Andrea Hanson, Vice President Educational Programs, BestPrep; **Back Row:** Susan Hodder, Self Employed; Vet James Atkinson; Therese Naber, Self Employed; Brad Blanshan, Business Development Supervisor, Motorwerks BMW. Minneapolis VA photographer **April Eilers**, who took picture at right, and VAHCS Acting Director **Barry Sharp**, were also assisting at the games.



ACT OF HEROISM

VA Nurse Saves Woman Choking in Restaurant



Capecchi, RN

A team from Minneapolis VA had just completed environment of care rounds at the Rice Lake, WI, CBOC around noon on April 3 when they headed to a local Chinese restaurant for lunch.

As the VA staffers were sitting around their table, a person from the next table shouted, “Does anyone know the Heimlich? My friend is choking!”

VA nurse **Teresa Capecchi, RN**, was the first to respond. Teresa asked the woman to stand and if she was indeed choking; the woman nodded yes. Teresa asked if she needed to have the Heimlich maneuver performed. The woman nodded yes.

Teresa performed the Heimlich maneuver several times, dislodging the food and saving the woman from potential harm.

According to CBOC clinic manager **Lori Baier**, who observed the incident: “Throughout this emergency, Teresa was calm and skillful. Both the woman who was choking and her lunch friend were very grateful. “

Back at the Minneapolis VA, Teresa acknowledged that she happened to be at the right place at the right time with the right training. She encouraged all VA staff to have CPR and first aid training.

“I’m just glad everything turned out all right,” said Teresa, who has been a VA nurse for almost three years. It was the first time she had used her Heimlich training.

Homeless Program Receives More Vouchers

As a result of a recent award from central office, the Minneapolis VA now has a total of 390 HUD/VASH vouchers to help homeless veterans in Minnesota. To refer a veteran: Call Minneapolis VA Homeless Office at 612-467-1771 or contact the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans (24/7) – call center that connects veterans to the VA and services; our office follows up with the veteran within 24 hrs. 1-877-424-3838 (1-877-4AID-VET).

New Video Available for Outreach Use

A 15-minute video, “Minneapolis VA Health Care System: Excellence through Learning, Discovery and Best Practices,” is available for staff to use when they present before academic, community and veteran groups. Copies available in Medical Media, Public Affairs, or online at: www.minneapolis.va.gov/news/video/MinneapolisVAExcellence.asp

On the Beat

March/April 2012

A publication of the Minneapolis VA Health Care System for staff, stakeholders, and Veterans. Your comments are welcome. Please send to:

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Mission:

Honor America’s Veterans by providing exceptional healthcare that improves their health and well being.

Vision:

To be a patient-centered, integrated health care organization for Veterans providing excellent health care, research and education.

VA Core Values:

- Integrity
- Commitment
- Advocacy
- Respect
- Excellence

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