

Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research: A Budget Proposal for FY 2007



About FOVA

Over fifteen years ago, the Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) coalition was founded to ensure that America's veterans receive high-quality health care. Today, FOVA is a diverse coalition representing more than 85 national academic, medical, and scientific societies; voluntary health and patient advocacy groups; and veteran-focused associations. FOVA organizations work in concert with the *Independent Budget* veterans service organizations to advocate appropriate funding for the research and health programs that serve the nation's veterans.

Among their many activities, FOVA members regularly brief members of Congress on the status of health care and research at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA); raise awareness of VA's medical and research programs; and host special events that highlight research successes achieved through VA efforts.

VA Research and Development

The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program is one of the nation's premier research endeavors and attracts high-caliber clinicians to deliver care and conduct research in VA health-care facilities. The VA research program is patient oriented and focused entirely on prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of conditions prevalent in the veteran population.

The VA research program is an intramural program; grantees must be VA employees. Unlike other federal research agencies, VA does not make grants to colleges and universities, or any other non-VA entity. As such, the program offers a dedicated funding source to attract and retain high-quality physicians and clinical investigators to the VA health care system. This in turn ensures that our nation's veterans receive state-of-the-art health care.

VA currently supports over 5,100 researchers, of whom 76 percent are practicing clinicians who provide direct patient care to veteran patients. As a result, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has a unique ability to translate progress in medical science directly to improvements in clinical care.

VA leverages the taxpayer's investment via a nationwide array of partnerships with the National Institutes of Health and other federal research funding agencies, for-profit industry partners, nonprofit organizations, and academic affiliates. This highly successful enterprise demonstrates the best in public-private cooperation.

The VA research program is divided into four major Research and Development (R&D) Services:

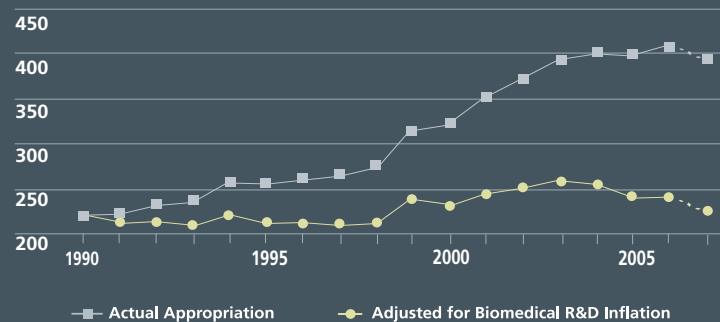
Biomedical and Laboratory R&D Service – Supports basic science and pre-clinical research related to diseases affecting veterans.

Clinical Science R&D Service – Administers investigations (e.g. multi-center cooperative studies) aimed at instituting new, more effective clinical care.

Health Services R&D Service – Identifies and promotes effective and efficient strategies to improve the organization, cost effectiveness, and delivery of health care at the patient and system levels.

Rehabilitation R&D Service – Integrates science, engineering and medicine to develop concepts, processes, and products that improve the quality of life for impaired and disabled veterans.

VA Research and Development Funding FY 1990-2007 (in millions)



Aside from the medical and prosthetic research appropriation, VA provides support to the research program in the form of clinician salaries and facilities and administrative costs. Additionally, VA scientists are successful in competing for, and leveraging, research support from other federal agencies such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH), foundations, and industry. In FY 2007, VA estimates its total research enterprise at over \$1.6 billion. However, a commitment to steady and sustainable growth in the annual VA research and development appropriation is necessary for maximum productivity.

VA Research – Total Budgetary Resources (in millions)

	FY 2005 Actual	FY 2006 Estimate	FY 2007 Proposed	06-07 Δ
R&D Appropriations*	\$390.2	\$412	\$399	-3.16%
Medical Care Support	\$340.6	\$353	\$366	3.68%
Other	\$819.5	\$866.7	\$884.1	2.00%
Total	\$1,550.3	\$1,631.7	\$1,649.1	1.06%

*Information Technology (IT) funding excluded for comparative purposes.

Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research: FY 2007 Recommendations

Medical and Prosthetics Research \$460 million

VA needs significant growth in its annual Research and Development appropriation to continue to achieve breakthroughs in health care for its current population and to develop new solutions for its most recent veterans. Investments in investigator-initiated research projects at VA have led to an explosion of knowledge that is advancing the understanding of disease and unlocking strategies for prevention, treatment, and cures. The complexity of research combined with biomedical research inflation has increased the cost of research. At least \$16 million is required just to maintain the current level of research activity on conditions prevalent in the veteran population such as diabetes, heart diseases, Parkinson's disease, mental health functions, aging, and spinal cord injury. Additional funding is needed to take advantage of the burgeoning opportunities to improve quality of life for our veterans and the nation as a whole. With these funds, it is expected that VA would pursue the following in fiscal year 2007:

Rehabilitation: Enhance rehabilitation programs for veterans by funding studies on treating depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Continue development of neural and muscular microsensor and microstimulator technology used to treat paralysis and restore function in limbs.

Prosthetics: Develop new sensory and motor prostheses, including retinal replacements for older veterans and more sophisticated sensors to provide return stimulation and to work with separately powered motors in replacement limbs. Develop procedures that improve prosthetic fit and comfort as well as new prostheses.

Traumatic Injury: Conduct research on understanding and treating traumatic

spinal cord, brain, and limb injury to restore veterans to functionality, perhaps taking advantage of "neural plasticity" through intensive rehabilitation. Additionally, acute and long-term care strategies are needed to address the poly-traumatic blast-related injuries and severe burns being experienced in Iraq.

Quality Improvement: Fund the Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) program and other efforts to ensure appropriate, high-quality care for veterans. VA plans to add centers and initiatives focused on acute care, long-term care, and health disparities to an already impressive list of topics being examined under this innovative program.

Genomics: Construct a genomic database of the veterans population to study customizing drug therapy for individual patients, preventing diseases, and predicting genetic disorders.

Chronic Diseases and their Complications: Expand work on understanding and treating chronic diseases and their complications in such areas as obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), obesity, kidney disorders, heart diseases, diabetes and its complications, hepatitis C, and stroke.

Diseases of the Brain: Study stroke causes and treatments and increase support for researchers working on Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, Huntington's Disease and Parkinson's disease. Also, focus on the causes and new therapies for ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) among veterans of Gulf War I.

Research Facilities Improvement \$45 million

State-of-the-art research requires state-of-the-art technology, equipment, and facilities. Such an environment promotes excellence in teaching and patient care as well as research. It also helps VA

recruit and retain the best and brightest clinician scientists. Unfortunately, funding for the VA medical and prosthetics research program has failed to provide the resources needed to maintain, upgrade, and replace aging research facilities.

In House Report 109-95 accompanying the FY 2006 VA appropriations, Congress expresses concern that equipment and facilities supporting the research program may be lacking and that some mechanism is necessary to ensure the Department's research facilities remain competitive. It noted that more resources may be required to ensure that research facilities are properly maintained to support the Department's research mission. Many VA facilities have run out of adequate research space, and ventilation, electrical supply, and plumbing appear frequently on lists of needed upgrades along with space reconfiguration. Under the current system, research must compete in the minor construction budget with other facility needs for basic infrastructure and physical plant support. To ensure that funding is adequate to meet both immediate and long term needs, FOVA recommends a steady stream of resources dedicated to renovating existing research facilities and major construction funding sufficient to replace at least one outdated facility per year until the backlog is addressed.

Medical Care \$32.4 billion

The VA health care system is severely underfunded. Consistent with the *Independent Budget*, FOVA recommends an FY 2007 appropriation of at least \$32.4 billion for the VA medical care budget. The recommended increase would cover expected medical care inflation; the influx of new veterans from Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom; and necessary improvements to address the increasing complexity and volume of care needed by VA's aging population.

VA Medical Care

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) supports the needs of America's veterans by providing primary care, specialty care, and the related medical and social support services. Through the Medical Care appropriation, VHA operates one of the largest comprehensive, integrated health care delivery systems in the United States. Organized around 21 Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs), VHA operates 156 hospitals, 862 outpatient clinics, and 134 nursing homes. In FY 2007, VHA estimates it will care for almost 5.5 million veterans.

In addition to providing primary health care to veterans, VHA also offers a variety of specialized services, including:

- centers for spinal cord injury, blindness, and polytrauma rehabilitation;
- substance abuse treatment programs and readjustment counseling services;
- prosthetic and sensory assistance services and rehabilitation referral centers;
- audiology programs and speech pathology services;
- treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD);
- ambulatory care centers;
- AIDS treatment centers;
- long-term care centers;
- Parkinson's Disease Research, Education and Clinical Centers (PADRECCs);
- Geriatric Research, Education, and Clinical Centers (GRECCs);
- Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Centers (MIRECCs); and
- women's health centers.

Training Health Care Professionals and Clinical Researchers

Since 1946, affiliations between VA medical centers and the nation's health professions schools have provided a critical link that brings expert clinicians and researchers to the VA health system. These long-standing affiliations with the academic health care community are a major factor in ensuring quality care for US veterans and represent a model partnership between the federal government and non-federal institutions.

Today, VA manages the largest medical education and health professions training program in the United States. 107 of the nation's 125 accredited allopathic medical schools are affiliated with VA medical centers. The VA system accounts for approximately 9 percent of all graduate medical education in the country, supporting more than 8,800 full-time medical residency training positions. More than half the nation's physicians receive some part of their medical training in VA hospitals, as over 28,000 medical residents and nearly 17,000 medical students rotate through the VA health system each year. In total, approximately 83,000 health professionals from over 1,200 colleges and universities train each year at VA medical facilities.

VA medical centers are ideal training centers for tomorrow's caregivers. The VA provides unique opportunities for medical students and residents to participate in ambulatory education and training. For example, more than 70 percent of VA medical centers have long-term care components, placing VA at the forefront of educating health care professionals in geriatrics. As the veteran population ages along with the general population, it is important that the nation has an adequate supply of geriatricians and physicians who can treat complex, aging-related illnesses. The educational opportunities available at the VA are critical to exposing future health professionals to the type of care they will deliver during their careers, while simultaneously affording veterans access to the high-quality skills and environment inherent in an academic setting.

In conjunction with affiliated health professions schools, VA mentored research training programs provide young scientists with an opportunity to develop skills as clinician-researchers. The programs are designed to offer a stepwise progression, as research experience increases, to the point of independent funding. Junior investigators with varying levels of experience are eligible for training programs ranging from 1 to 3 years of VA support, including the Associate Investigator, the Career Development Awards, and the Merit Review Entry programs.

VA Medical Care Outscores Private Sector – Again (January, 2006)

Veterans continue to be more satisfied with their health care than the average American, according to the annual American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which ranks "customer satisfaction" of various federal programs and private-sector industries. The ACSI gave VA's inpatient care a rating of 83 on a 100-point scale, 10 percentage points higher than the 73 rating achieved for inpatient care by the private-sector health care industry. VA's rating of 80 for outpatient care was five percentage points higher than the 75 rating for private-sector outpatient care and 9 percentage points higher than the average satisfaction rating for all federal services. The latest findings mark the sixth consecutive year VA's health care system has outranked the private sector for patient satisfaction.

Recent Achievements

New depression-care model yields big gains for little money (December 2005)

An innovative model of depression care for older adults yields better outcomes without substantially raising costs, suggests a large study that involved VA and seven other health systems. The model features specially trained nurses, social workers or psychologists who support the efforts of primary-care doctors, and consulting psychiatrists. The cost-benefit study shows that the model, known as IMPACT—"Improving Mood: Promoting Access to Collaborative Treatment"—enables patients to experience significant benefits at an additional outpatient cost to their healthcare providers of only about \$148 per year.

Sleep apnea may be risk factor for stroke (November 2005)

A recent study by researchers from the VA Connecticut Healthcare System and Yale University School of Medicine indicated patients who had obstructive sleep apnea were twice as likely to have a stroke or die from any cause during the 3.5-year follow-up period. In sleep apnea, the upper airway closes repeatedly during sleep. Prior research had linked this disorder to a higher risk of stroke and other cardiovascular diseases, but researchers were not sure if this was only because patients with sleep apnea were also more likely to have other risk factors, such as obesity or high blood pressure. In the new study, researchers determined that the connection between sleep apnea and stroke persists in the absence of other risk factors.

VA-Yale team finds molecular basis for 'phantom pain' (October 2005)

Researchers from VA and Yale University School of Medicine identified a molecular basis for "phantom

pain," a phenomenon in which amputees and patients with spinal cord injury experience the sensation of excruciating pain in a limb that is no longer there or that has lost all perception. The research team reported that the problem is due to over-sensitive brain cells in the thalamus, a region of the brain that relays sensory messages to the cerebral cortex. Specifically, these brain cells contain abnormally high levels of a specialized protein that serves as a "battery," allowing electrical impulses to travel between cells.

Shingles Vaccine Shows Promise in Clinical Trial (June 2005)

In one of the largest adult vaccine trials in medical history, VA researchers and colleagues at 22 sites found that an experimental vaccine for shingles—a painful nerve and skin condition that affects many older adults—reduced the incidence of the disease by more than half, and dramatically limited its severity and complications. Shingles, which affects about a million Americans each year, is caused by a re-awakening of dormant chickenpox virus in the body. It is marked by a painful, blistering rash, and sometimes leads to lingering long-term pain known as post-herpetic neuralgia. The trial was conducted in cooperation with the National Institutes of Health and involved nearly 39,000 older men and women.

Halting Brain Damage After Diabetic Coma (May 2005)

Researchers at the San Francisco VA Medical Center showed in animal studies that pyruvate—a natural, nontoxic byproduct of glucose metabolism—may prevent brain-cell death and cognitive loss in diabetics following an episode of severely low blood sugar. Standard emergency-

room treatment for such episodes of severe hypoglycemia—low blood sugar—is glucose alone. This restores consciousness right away, but does not always prevent the subsequent death of brain cells and possible cognitive impairment. According to the new research, pyruvate plus glucose may not only restore consciousness, but also be effective in preventing brain damage.

DHA Fights Alzheimer's Brain Plaques in Mice (March 2005)

Researchers with VA and the University of California, Los Angeles, found that a diet high in docosahexenoic acid (DHA) dramatically slowed the progression of Alzheimer's disease in mice. Specifically, DHA cut the harmful brain plaques that mark the disease. DHA—found in fish, algae-based nutritional supplements, and other food sources—is already touted by many health experts for its role in cardiovascular health. A study by the same researchers in 2004 showed that DHA protected the "synaptic" areas where brain cells communicate and enabled mice to perform better on memory tests.

Fiber-rich diet wards off heartburn (January 2005)

Eating more fiber and less fat may mean less heartburn, according to a VA study of 371 volunteers in Houston. Individuals with diets higher in fiber and lower in fat were less likely to suffer chronic heartburn and regurgitation of food, or gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Although fiber has long been lauded for its role in heart and colon health, the study is among the first to suggest that fiber may offer further digestive benefits. The VA study is one of the most comprehensive analyses yet of how diet affects GERD.

Organizations Endorsing the FOVA FY 2007 Recommendations:

Administrators of Internal Medicine
Alliance for Academic Internal Medicine
Alliance for Aging Research
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Academy of Neurology
American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases
American Association of Anatomists
American Association of Colleges of Nursing
American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine
American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy
American Association of Spinal Cord Injury Nurses
American Association of Spinal Cord Injury Psychologists and Social Workers
American Society for Bone and Mineral Research
American College of Chest Physicians
American College of Clinical Pharmacology
American College of Physicians
American College of Rheumatology
American Dental Education Association
American Federation for Medical Research
American Gastroenterological Association
American Geriatrics Society
American Heart Association
American Hospital Association
American Lung Association
American Military Retirees Association
American Occupational Therapy Association
American Optometric Association
American Osteopathic Association
American Paraplegia Society
American Physiological Society
American Podiatric Medical Association
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychological Association
American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics
American Society of Hematology
American Society of Nephrology
American Thoracic Society
Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International
Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology
Association of Academic Health Centers
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of Professors of Medicine
Association of Program Directors in Internal Medicine
Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry
Association of Specialty Professors
Association of VA Chiefs of Medicine
Association of VA Nurse Anesthetists
Blinded Veterans Association
Blue Star Mothers of America
Clerkship Directors in Internal Medicine
Coalition for Health Services Research
Digestive Disease National Coalition
FASEB (Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology)
Gerontological Society of America
Gold Star Wives
Hepatitis Foundation International
International Foundation for Functional Gastroenterological Disorders
Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International
Legion of Valor of the USA, Inc.
Medical Device Manufacturers Association
Medicine-Pediatrics Program Directors Association
Military Officers Association of America
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for the Advancement of Orthotics and Prosthetics
National Association for Uniformed Services
National Association of VA Dermatologists
National Association of VA Physicians and Dentists
National Association of Veterans' Research and Education Foundations
National Mental Health Association
Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs
Osteogenesis Imperfecta Foundation
Paralyzed Veterans of America
Paralyzed Veterans of America Spinal Cord Research Foundation
Partnership Foundation for Optometric Education
Society for Investigative Dermatology
Society for Neuroscience
Society for Women's Health Research
Society of General Internal Medicine
Spinal Cord Research Foundation
The Endocrine Society
United Spinal Association
Veterans Affairs Physician Assistant Association
Veterans of the Vietnam War and the Veterans Coalition
Vietnam Veterans of America

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