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American Legion is “appalled” by conditions at Jackson VA facility

The American Legion’s national commander wants VA to take immediate action to correct deplorable conditions at the Jackson VAMC

WASHINGTON (Nov. 14, 2013) -- Daniel M. Dellinger, national commander of The American Legion said he is “appalled” by conditions at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical center in Jackson, Miss.

A Nov. 13 congressional hearing focused on a variety of serious, ongoing problems at the G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery VA Medical Center (VAMC), including poor sterilization procedures, understaffing, misdiagnoses and poor management practices.

“The VA facility in Jackson has failed in its responsibility to protect veterans who depend on it for their health care,” Dellinger said. “When pieces of bone are still attached to surgical instruments that are being used on other patients, putting the lives of our veterans at risk, it is time to overhaul the entire hospital and remove – not transfer – the responsible parties.”

The hearing, held by the House Veterans Affairs’ Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations, examined a variety of serious problems at the Jackson VA center and featured testimony by two “whistleblowers”: Dr. Phyllis Hollenbeck, M.D. and Dr. Charles Sherwood, M.D. Hollenbeck is a former physician of family medicine at the Jackson VAMC, and Sherwood was chief of ophthalmology there.

Each witness described a situation at the Jackson facility plagued with deficiencies. Hollenbeck alleged the Jackson VAMC had about 19 nurse practitioners (NPs) in its primary care unit, but only three doctors (including her). She estimated that about 85 percent of primary-care patients were getting medical care from NPs instead of physicians – and that patients were frequently unaware they were not being seen by doctors.

A July report made by the U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) found that 75 percent of the Jackson VAMC’s primary-care staff were NPs (the average VA-wide is 25 percent).

“We’ve got a VA medical center in Jackson that has about a three-to-one ratio of nurse practitioners to physicians in its primary care unit,” Dellinger said. “According to OSC, that ratio at comparable facilities is one nurse practitioner for every three doctors. How did things get so grossly incompetent in Jackson?”

A Nov. 12 story by CNBC focused on poor sterilization procedures at the Jackson medical center that left bone fragments on instruments. The allegations were made by an orthopedic surgeon who used to work at the facility; he spoke to CNBC on the condition of anonymity.

“When you have VA medical staff who are afraid to reveal their identities to the public, you know

that a culture of fear and reprisal probably exists in the Jackson medical center,” Dellinger said. “That is no way to honor the memory of Sonny Montgomery, one of the strongest advocates for veterans to ever walk the halls of the Capitol.”

Dellinger noted that VA gave bonuses last year to Joe Battle, the Jackson VAMC’s director, and to Rica Lewis-Payton, who directs the South Central Health Care Network (of which the Jackson facility is a part). “This is rubbing salt into the wounds of our veterans being treated in Jackson.”

U.S. Special Counsel Carolyn Lerner, in a Sept. 17 letter to President Obama, recounted the findings of two OSC reports done in July on allegations made by Hollenbeck and Sherwood. She wrote that “VA has consistently failed to take responsibility for identified problems. Even in cases of substantiated misconduct, including acknowledged violations of state and federal law, the VA routinely suggests that the problems do not affect patient care.”

As an example, Lerner mentioned that, while the Jackson VAMC was under investigation, its director publicly stated that issues at the facility were minor and “did not impact patient care.”

“Such statements fail to grasp the significance of the concerns raised by Drs. Hollenbeck and Sherwood,” Lerner wrote, “and call into question the facility’s commitment to implementing necessary reforms.”

Congress has asked the Jackson VAMC to provide it with a report on the current situation within 30 days. Dellinger said The American Legion has asked VA for a copy of that report, as well as an update within the next few days on conditions at the Jackson facility.

“It is inexcusable for any VA facility to operate under conditions that place the lives of America’s veterans in danger,” Dellinger said. “We expect the individuals who are responsible for the conditions at the Jackson medical center to be held accountable.”

Members of the Legion’s System Worth Saving Task Force will visit the Jackson VAMC next January to evaluate the quality of its health care, and will conduct interviews with administrators, medical staff and patients.

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Contact: Marty Callaghan:202-263-5758/202-215-8644, mcallaghan@legion.org. A high resolution photo of Nat. Cmdr. Dellinger is available at www.legion.org.