



Department of Veterans Affairs  
Office of Inspector General

Office of Healthcare Inspections

Report No. 13-04474-157

## Healthcare Inspection

# Podiatry Clinic Staffing Issues and Delays in Care Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System Montgomery, Alabama

May 19, 2014

Washington, DC 20420

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## Executive Summary

The VA Office of Inspector General Office of Healthcare Inspections conducted a review at the request of Senator Jeff Sessions to assess allegations concerning Podiatry Clinic staffing issues and delays in care at the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System in Montgomery, Alabama. The complainant alleged that:

- The Podiatry Clinic located at Maxwell Air Force Base had an insufficient number of trained clerical staff.
- New referrals and appointment scheduling were delayed due to a lack of trained clerical staff.

We substantiated the allegation that the clinic lacked a sufficient number of trained clerical staff, which resulted in delays processing new referrals and scheduling appointments. However, these delays appeared to be related to the frequent leave and subsequent retirement of the assigned trained clerk and the lack of access to the Department of Defense's TRICARE® system for the clerks covering the clinic during these absences. The facility addressed this gap by taking actions to ensure that the clinic was staffed with a properly trained clerk on an interim and permanent basis, with access to the TRICARE® system. We conducted a review of the timeframes for scheduled appointments after the reassignment of a trained clerk and found that Veterans Health Administration and Department of Defense patients were generally scheduled within the required 7 days. We made no recommendations.

### Comments

The Veterans Integrated Service Network and System Directors concurred with the report. (See Appendixes A and B, pages 5–6, for the Directors' comments.) No further action is required.



JOHN D. DAIGH, JR., M.D.  
Assistant Inspector General for  
Healthcare Inspections

## Purpose

The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) Office of Healthcare Inspections assessed allegations concerning staffing and delays in care at the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System's (CAVHCS) combined Podiatry Clinic located at Maxwell Air Force Base (MAFB), AL at the request of Senator Jeff Sessions. The purpose of the review was to determine whether the allegations had merit.

## Background

CAVHCS is a two-division health care system located in Montgomery and Tuskegee, AL, that provides a broad range of inpatient and outpatient health care services. Outpatient care is also provided at three community-based outpatient clinics located in Dothan and Fort Rucker, AL, and in Columbus, GA. CAVHCS is part of Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 7 and serves a veteran population of about 134,000 in central and southeastern Alabama and western Georgia.

In 2004, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was established between CAVHCS and the 42nd Medical Group at MAFB to provide podiatry services to VA patients and Department of Defense (DoD) beneficiaries. The combined Podiatry Clinic is staffed by VA podiatrists and nurses but utilizes DoD space, utilities, and parking. The Podiatry Clinic is located on the first floor of the MAFB clinic building approximately 8 miles from CAVHCS's Montgomery campus.

According to the 2004 MOU, CAVHCS and MAFB were each responsible for providing one clerk to staff the Podiatry Clinic. Subsequently, MAFB removed their clerk from the clinic, reportedly due to the low volume of administrative duties. In the revised 2011 MOU, CAVHCS is responsible for providing a podiatry clerk to schedule Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and DoD referrals. Per the 2011 MOU, the Podiatry Clinic must obtain an approved TRICARE®<sup>1</sup> consult for each DoD beneficiary prior to scheduling an appointment. The Podiatry Clinic clerk is required to have TRICARE® access in order to obtain the approval. The clerk is then required to use VHA's electronic appointment management system to schedule an appointment. According to VHA requirements, consults are to be acknowledged and an appointment scheduled within 7 days of receipt by the specialty service.<sup>2,3</sup>

In October 2012, the OIG Hotline Division received a complaint regarding deficient staffing and operations in the combined Podiatry Clinic and, in accordance with OIG policy and practices, referred the case to CAVHCS leadership for review. Upon receipt of CAVHCS's response, OIG closed the complaint without further evaluation. On September 13, 2013, the OIG received a congressional inquiry on behalf of the

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<sup>1</sup> TRICARE® is the health care program serving Uniformed Service members, retirees, and their families.

<sup>2</sup> VHA Directive 2010-027, VHA Outpatient Scheduling Processes and Procedures, June 9, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> CAVHCS Memorandum 11-11-51, *Clinical Consultation (Intra-Facility)*, September 19, 2011.

complainant who reported errors in CAVHCS's initial investigation and response. Therefore, we conducted a review to determine whether there was an insufficient number of trained clerical staff in the clinic and, if so, whether this deficiency resulted in delays processing new referrals and scheduling appointments.

## Scope and Methodology

We conducted a site visit December 9–11, 2013. Prior to our site visit, we reviewed documents provided by the complainant; relevant national and local policies and procedures; the 2004 and 2011 MOUs; training records; patient advocate reports; quality reviews; selected patient electronic health records (EHR); and data related to podiatry workload, wait times, and clerical staffing. We interviewed the complainant, the Chief of Staff, the Associate Chief of Staff for Acute Care and Specialty Care, and the 42nd Medical Group and CAVHCS patient advocates. We also interviewed staff from the Business Office, Podiatry Service, and Nursing Service. During our on-site visit, we toured the combined Podiatry Clinic.

We conducted the inspection in accordance with *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation* published by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency.

## Inspection Results

### ***Clerical Staffing***

We substantiated that the Podiatry Clinic periodically lacked a sufficient number of adequately trained clerks to provide back-up coverage when the primary clerk was on leave.

For several years, the Podiatry Clinic had a permanently assigned clerk who had access to the TRICARE® system and VHA's appointment management system and had been trained to process the podiatry referrals for VHA and DoD patients. The assigned clerk was absent from the clinic during several periods of planned and unplanned leave between January 2012 and June 2013, and the only time coverage was provided by a trained back up clerk was in February 2012. During other times when the primary clerk was on leave, and then subsequently retired in June 2013, we did not find evidence that a trained back-up clerk with TRICARE® access was available to manage the DoD referrals.

### ***New Referral Processing and Appointment Scheduling***

We substantiated that at various times when the primary clerk was on leave, some DoD referrals and appointments were not processed timely. Since the complainant did not provide specific patient names, we reviewed the EHRs of VHA and DoD patients<sup>4</sup> who were referred during the 2 weeks after the primary clerk retired in June 2013. During this period, 46 VHA and 11 DoD referrals were made for podiatry services, and the covering clerk did not have access to the TRICARE® system to process the DoD referrals. We found that, on average, VHA patients were scheduled within 3 days of receipt of the consult. However, the average length of time to schedule DoD patients was 9 days, which exceeded VHA expectations. The MAFB patient advocate informed us that, in general, access to podiatry services has not been an issue for DoD patients.

As of June 27, 2013, three clerical staff have secured the necessary TRICARE® access and training. The facility planned to have one clerk serve as the primary temporary replacement, with two alternates available to provide coverage as needed. At the time of our visit, we were informed that the hiring process for a permanent replacement clerk was being completed. To evaluate the effectiveness of the new staffing arrangement, we reviewed the EHRs of 50 VHA patients and 14 DoD patients who were referred between July 15 and July 30, 2013. We found that during this period, both VHA and DoD patients were generally scheduled within the required 7 days.

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<sup>4</sup> VA podiatrists documented care and treatment to DoD beneficiaries in the VA EHR as defined in the MOU.

## Conclusions

We substantiated the allegation that at times, the Podiatry Clinic did not have properly trained clerks to assure prompt management of the new DoD referrals. While the allegation had merit, it appeared to be related to the frequent leave and subsequent retirement of the primary clerk and the use of untrained clerks to provide coverage. The facility addressed this gap in June 2013 by taking actions to train additional staff and develop a plan for ongoing coverage.

We made no recommendations.

## VISN Director Comments

**Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

**Memorandum**

**Date:** April 15, 2014

**From:** Director, Veterans Southeast Network (10N7)

**Subject:** Healthcare Inspection—Podiatry Clinic Staffing  
Issues and Delays in Care, CAVHCS, Montgomery, Alabama

**To:** Director, Atlanta Office of Healthcare Inspections (54AT)  
Director, Management Review Service (VHA 10AR MRS OIG Hotline)

1. I have reviewed the subject report and we appreciate your comprehensive review of our systems and process. VISN 7 Network Office leadership will continue to provide CAVHCS the needed support and resources to ensure that veterans receive the best care and timely access.
2. If you have questions or need additional information, please contact my Dr. Robin Hindsman at 678-924-5723.

*(original signed by:)*  
Charles E. Sepich, FACHE



## Facility Director Comments

**Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

**Memorandum**

**Date:** April 8, 2014

**From:** Director, Central Alabama Veteran Health Care System (CAVHCS),  
Montgomery, AL (619/00)

**Subject:** Healthcare Inspection—Podiatry Clinic Staffing Issues and Delays in  
Care, CAVHCS, Montgomery, Alabama

**To:** Director, VA Southeast Network (10N7)

1. CAVHCS concurs with the report findings related to the December 9-11, 2013 review of the Maxwell Podiatry Clinic located at Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB).
2. CAVHCS Podiatry Clinic at Maxwell AFB maintains and ensures a full time clerical staff, with Department of Defense's (DoD) TRICARE® system access. There is a trained permanent primary clerical staff member to perform scheduling of appointments, follow-up and referrals.
3. To ensure complete backup coverage in times of both planned and unplanned absence, additional trained clerical staff members with DoD TRICARE® system access are available.
4. Currently, patients at CAVHCS Podiatry Clinic at Maxwell AFB are scheduled within the seven-day timeframe as required.

*(original signed by:)*  
James R. Talton, FACHE  
Director

## OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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