

**ADMINISTRATIVE SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATION  
BY THE VA OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL  
IN RESPONSE TO ALLEGATIONS  
REGARDING PATIENT WAIT TIMES**



**VA Medical Center in Portland, Oregon  
March 7, 2016**

**1. Summary of Why the Investigation Was Initiated**

On May 22, 2014, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Inspector General (OIG) received information that schedulers at the VA Medical Center (VAMC) in Portland, OR, used fictitious patients, known as "ZZ Test Patients" (ZZTP), to occupy appointment times in the computerized scheduling system for the Neurosurgery Clinic.

**2. Description of the Conduct of the Investigation**

- **Interviews Conducted:** VA OIG interviewed four administrative employees and the director of VAMC Portland.
- **Records Reviewed:** Data regarding ZZTP use by VAMC Portland for the period ranging from October 1, 2013, through April 30, 2014, was reviewed and analyzed. A similar review of data from June 2014 also was conducted.

**3. Summary of the Evidence Obtained From the Investigation**

**Interviews Conducted**

- During interviews, the four administrators reported that the VAMC Portland Neurosurgery Clinic had used ZZTP appointments as placeholders for unanticipated medically urgent patients. The VAMC Portland scheduling system allowed all Neurosurgery Clinic medical scheduling assistants (MSAs) to schedule consults in any clinic. VAMC Portland has several hundred MSAs with scheduling access. Many MSAs were inappropriately scheduling appointments in the Neurosurgery Clinic, which is a very specialized unit. The fact that non-Neurosurgery schedulers could book appointments directly in Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture (Vista) without consulting with the clinic caused problems with booking appointments appropriately. Neurosurgery Clinic MSAs used ZZTP placeholders to ensure appointment slots were available for clinic patients. VAMC Portland self-reported this issue in December 2013 and the VAMC took action by allowing only Neurosurgery Clinic MSAs to make appointments for the clinic. In addition, MSAs were retrained on policy and new rules regarding Neurosurgery Clinic scheduling.
- The director, VAMC Portland, advised that the issue was self-reported by the facility prior to her appointment. She stated that corrective actions had been taken regarding scheduling and facility management continues to monitor ZZTP use at VAMC Portland to ensure that this type of appointment is used appropriately.

## Records Reviewed

- Review of data regarding ZZTP use by VAMC Portland for the period ranging from October 1, 2013, through April 30, 2014, confirmed that VAMC Portland used ZZTP records to occupy appointment slots in VistA at various clinics, including the Neurosurgery Clinic. ZZTP appointments can be used in VistA for training and other specified instances. ZZTP appointments are not authorized for use as placeholders for future patient appointment.
- In June 2014, a review of VAMC Portland's system for ZZTP appointments found only four instances in the system. During interviews, it was determined that these four ZZTP appointments were known to, and sanctioned by, management for specific situations.

## 4. Conclusion

The review did not substantiate that inappropriate scheduling was ongoing at the time of this complaint. VA OIG review found that VAMC Portland did use ZZTP to reserve appointments for the Neurosurgery Clinic until December 2013, when the facility self-reported the problem and took corrective action. The facility determined that Neurosurgery Clinic MSAs used ZZTP appointments to ensure patients who needed to be seen in the clinic could access appointments as non-Neurosurgery MSAs were scheduling appointments for patients who should not be seen in the clinic. ZZTP appointments in the system did not negatively affect quality of care for patients. The facility changed the scheduling processes for the Neurosurgery Clinic between December 2013 and April 2014, prior to this complaint to VA OIG, which has resulted in the proper use of ZZTP appointments at VAMC Portland. This change has enhanced patient access to the Neurosurgery Clinic.

The OIG referred the Report of Investigation to VA's Office of Accountability Review on February 3, 2015.



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