

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



**VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic
in Chehalis, Washington
March 25, 2016**

1. Summary of Why the Investigation Was Initiated

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Puget Sound Health Care System Director notified the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) regarding an allegation that a manager pressured a medical scheduling assistant (MSA) to change patients' desired dates for medical appointments. The director advised that he had met with an MSA from the Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) Chehalis who brought this allegation to his attention. The MSA advised that a former manager at CBOC Chehalis had pressured the MSA to change patient desired dates on several occasions. The complainant assumed that the former CBOC manager got direction to do so from another person in the General Medicine Service. The last time the MSA had been asked to change a patient's desired dates was in approximately January 2014.

CBOC Chehalis is managed by a private VA contractor. Unless otherwise identified, the individuals who were interviewed are employees of the contract company.

2. Description of the Conduct of the Investigation

- **Interviews Conducted:** We interviewed CBOC Chehalis MSAs, the former CBOC Manager, and the former VA Contracting Officer's Technical Representative (COTR) for the CBOC program.
- **Records Reviewed:** We reviewed hundreds of email messages belonging to the former CBOC manager and to the COTR.

3. Summary of the Evidence Obtained From the Investigation

Interviews Conducted

- MSA1 at CBOC Chehalis said that a former CBOC manager had asked MSA1 to change patient desired appointment dates on at least three occasions over the last 2 years in order to comply with VA's 14-day appointment metric. Scheduling veterans within the 14-day "desired date" to appointment date time frame was challenging due to a lack of staff, an absence of clear directives and training from VA, and difficulty using the Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture (VistA) scheduling program. MSA1 was not advised of the reason for the instruction to change the desired dates on the three occasions. No patients lost appointments or had any treatment withheld because of these changes. MSA1 explained that by using the VistA software package program, the scheduler is locked into a 14-day period. If the veteran desired to be seen on a date not available in the 2-week time frame, the desired date would be changed in order to open

another 14-day block of appointments. Had the appointment occurred, the desired date could not have been changed. MSA1 advised that the changes to patient desired date records were not made to deceive or maliciously falsify patient dates.

- MSA2 at CBOC Chehalis stated that she had changed the desired date for two or three patients at least 3 years previously at the direction of the former CBOC manager referenced above. MSA2 said these changes were not made to deceive or maliciously falsify patient desired dates. MSA2 believed that the former CBOC manager had received an email from “someone” instructing him/her to “fix them.” MSA2 often received emails from her supervisor to fix other clerical errors or mistakes that schedulers made and she believed that these changes were clerical fixes.
- MSA3 stated that MSA3 had changed the patient desired date in VistA two to three times over the last couple of years. MSA3 said that the former CBOC manager received an email list from someone at VA with patient dates that needed to be changed. MSA3 said that these schedule changes were not made to deceive or falsify patient desire dates.
- The former CBOC manager stated that he/she had told the schedulers to change some desired dates over the course of a few years in order to meet the requirements of his/her company’s contract with VA. On some occasions the patients’ desired dates had been input incorrectly by their schedulers. The former CBOC manager said that any changes sent to him/her to change or fix patient desired dates came from the VA COTR via VA email. The former CBOC manager never received a list of veteran desired dates to change. The former CBOC manager stated that the changing of the desired dates did not seem out of the ordinary for the few times that he/she was directed to change the dates. The former CBOC manager recalled having the MSAs change patient desired dates three or four times over the last 3 years because they were scheduling errors, which he/she described as times when the MSA input the wrong year into the VistA program. The former CBOC manager believed that the notices coming from the VA COTR asking to correct the desired dates were normal procedures.
- The former VA COTR stated that the 14-day appointment mandate was explicitly explained to the staff of CBOC Chehalis and that providing appointments within 14 days of the patients’ desired dates was a part of the contractor’s performance measures. The VA COTR did not recall any issues related to changing patients’ desired dates. The VA COTR said that if he saw any patient appointments on a list that were scheduled more than 14 days after the patient’s desired dates, he would contact the former CBOC manager and tell him/her to meet the performance requirement. The VA COTR stated that he had had several meetings with CBOC Chehalis staff to ensure their understanding and compliance with the 14-day schedule metric. The VA COTR denied telling any CBOC staff to change patient desired dates to meet the 14-day requirement. The VA COTR said that he did put pressure on the contractor to meet performance objectives,

such as scheduling patients within the 14-day window. The VA COTR denied sending any emails to the former CBOC manager instructing him/her to change patient desired dates.

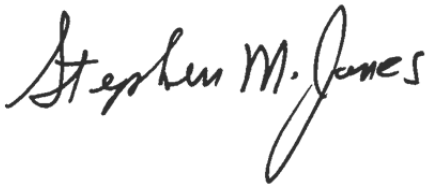
Records Reviewed

We reviewed VA email records from staff at VA Puget Sound Health Care System and CBOC Chehalis. No emails were found indicating that the VA COTR or the former CBOC manager instructed staff to change desired dates outside of VA policy. Several emails sent by VA officials directed staff on appropriate scheduling practices.

4. Conclusion

The investigation revealed that CBOC Chehalis MSAs made changes to patients' desired date information in VistA on less than 10 occasions during the last 3 years. It was also reported that some of the initial patient desired date data had been input incorrectly, which resulted in the former CBOC manager receiving instructions to fix the data input errors.

The OIG referred the Report of Investigation to VA's Office of Accountability Review on August 10, 2015.



STEPHEN M. JONES
Deputy Assistant Inspector General
for Investigations

For more information about this summary, please contact the
Office of Inspector General at (202) 461-4720.
