



Perspective

Veteran's Day Reflection

by Kenneth Lee, MD – Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation

“Thank you for taking care of my patients.” These words meant something to me when I addressed nurses, therapists, dieticians, pharmacists, and many other disciplines at the Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC), especially when Veteran's Day came around.

But now, I no longer say these words. Why? Let's see.....

I have been a physician in the VA system since 1997 and my whole medical career has been at the VAMC. I retired from the military after twenty-seven years of service in 2013. I spent years, first in active duty and then as a reserve soldier. Now, I am a retired military veteran. I have seen leaderships change, colleagues move around, and viewpoints challenged and accepted over the years. The one thing that has stayed consistent in my life: The veterans.

I interact with different generations of veterans on a daily basis. Some are sick. Some are healthy. Some are disabled. Some are athletes. And, some are just friends. They are all serviced by the VA. So how are we doing on that front?

Some time ago, a second-year medical student approached me to help create an introductory curriculum on veteran care to be taken BEFORE medical students start their rotations at the VA. Without much thought, I agreed to be her mentor. Three years later, this is a fully formed, elective inter-professional educational curriculum created in partnership between MCW's schools of medicine and pharmacy. This curriculum covers the life of military service member during peacetime and war, the structures of the DOD and VA systems,

the development of interviewing skills with veterans, and much more. You can see the eagerness of the students in the classroom as they absorb the information the teachers and veterans share with them.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, there have been countless gestures by the community, despite the suffering, to provide comfort needed by the veterans. Boxed lunches for VA staff during the height of COVID -19 surge, generous donation of PPEs so we can continue to be safe during the care of the veterans, and many words and notes of encouragement.

It seems that during the worst of times, the veterans are never forgotten.

What else? You can tell your stories. You have them.

So, why do I no longer say the words, "*Thank you for taking care of my patients*"? I always thought of the veterans as my brothers and sisters. I never had second thoughts. But it was just one of those things that was part of the military/veteran culture. Just accepted it. But recently, I find myself truly belonging to this family. So, I now say....

"Thank you for taking care of my fellow veterans."

Kenneth Lee, MD is an Associate Professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at MCW who works and teaches at the Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee. He served as the Commander of the Army's Company B, 118th Area Support Medical Battalion in Iraq.

You can read more of his personal story and motivation for caring for veterans [here](#).