



Perspective/Opinion

Meaningful Careers in the VA

by Kayt Havens, MD – Retired VA Physician & Member of the Kern Institute Innovator's Lab

Twelve years ago, I received a call from Dr. Ann Nattinger asking if I would accept a position at the Zablocki VAMC as Director of the Women's Clinic. I am grateful every day that I said, “Yes.” My work there powerfully influenced my identity as an educator–physician and design learner. When I told colleagues and friends that I worked at the VA, their faces often registered disbelief. Little did they know that the VA has the history of being among the most innovative health care systems in this country.

This past Wednesday we celebrated Veterans Day. I am taking this opportunity to also honor the physicians and care teams who have committed some or all of their lives to the improvement of health care for veterans. I've asked some of our MCW Zablocki VAMC faculty why they chose to work in the VA. Below are some of their comments.

Dr. Jerome VanRuiswyk says, *“I do consider it a privilege to care for all types of veterans. Many veterans paid the ultimate price for freedom and didn't return; the rest were willing to pay that price and, you and I have the privilege to serve them. Other things that have drawn me to a career at the VA is the fact that the vast majority of veterans are truly grateful for the care they receive. The system focuses on caring for these unique patients no matter their socioeconomic status including their wide range of comorbidities, some which resulted from their service. Veterans are best served by the VA's multidisciplinary care teams who have a biopsychosocial approach to care.”*

Dr. Jeffrey Whittle, who has spent most of his career working throughout VA hospitals wrote, *“I think that working in the VA has been a privilege because so many of the employees are mission driven. They truly view the opportunity to*

serve veterans as an important reason to come to work.” As patients receive care regardless of their ability to pay has “allowed me to get to know people from across the socioeconomic spectrum on a personal level and has helped me recognize the nobility that is present.” Dr. Whittle also states that “history means more to me now.” He has worked with and taken care of the “ordinary people who have made that history,” having seen prisoners of war, a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, veterans of Pearl Harbor, the Omaha Beach landing on D-Day, and the Battle of the Bulge in his practice. These veterans and those of the Vietnam War and current conflicts have added to his sense of commitment.

Dr. Amy Farkas joined our VA two years ago after completing a women’s health fellowship at the Pittsburg VA. *“Caring for veterans is one of the many things I find rewarding.”* There are a host of professional reasons that make a VA career appealing to her. *“I’m lucky enough to be involved locally and nationally with the VA.”* As faculty, I spend 1 / 3 of my time developing Women's Health education programming for the national VA where there is this amazing network of women health leaders. This has been a huge benefit for my career. *“The VA also provides great resources for medical education and scholarship including research projects. I have access to immense amounts of data and powerful tools for utilizing it.”*

Dr. Margaret Holmes adds another dimension to her work at the VA. Her grandfather served in the trenches during World War I. Her beloved stepfather was a veteran of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam and her great-great-grandfather fought in the battle of Shiloh during the Civil War. Therefore, her work at the VA has a personal meaning as well. She notes that she cares for a much sicker, poorer population. She has the *“addition of terrific teams including a nurse, LPN and MSA who are all smart and capable.”* A dietitian, social worker and pharmacist are also housed in her clinic. She experiences fewer barriers to care as *“social workers slay the psychosocial dragons enabling us to see the patients more easily and get them access to services which are part of living a healthful life ... I never have to say your insurance doesn't cover that and medications are cheap or free for everyone.”* Dr. Holmes loves that she has time to do her job properly as there are no RVU’s, she has thirty minutes with each returning patient, sixty minutes for a new patient, and

“no one fusses if it takes longer to complete a visit.” Her collaboration with specialists is easy, and they're attentive to the needs of her patients.

For myself, my last five years at the VA included national work with the VA Innovators Network. As such, I traveled to thirty-two VA sites across the country and witnessed firsthand the commitment and dedication of frontline workers including nurses, occupational therapists, physical therapists, etc. through this network. Over \$3,000,000 a year was awarded to frontline employees who identified and solved problems encountered by veterans using human centered design as part of understanding the problem. 3D printing programs were established across these thirty-two hospitals to create everything from a personalized spoon for a stroke victim, to improving a poor prosthesis fit. A young woman whose leg was blown off in Afghanistan requested a prosthetic so she could wear a high heel for her wedding which was proudly presented to her. The Minneapolis VA critically created a wheelchair which a user could crank up to a standing position; imagine being able to roll yourself down an airplane aisle. One multidisciplinary team of occupational therapists, designer and engineers created a hamburger helper device for two veterans allowing them to eat a full hamburger at Red Robin. Previously the “claw” would destroy the burger half eaten. These projects were designed with veterans for veterans. I stand proudly with the veterans that my colleagues and I have served and those who have served me.

Students who want to know more can sign up for the Military Academic Enrichment Elective that will be offered in January 2021. Michael Nagy, PharmD and his team of medical and pharmacy students worked with students, faculty and veterans. This will be the third year this class is offered to medical students and represents innovative curriculum development.

Chase LaRue, an MCW–Milwaukee Class of 2023 medical student and member of the US Naval Reserves, shares the following information about the elective:

The **military academic enrichment elective** provides students a unique opportunity to learn specifically about veteran health care issues and considerations unique to this population. They explore the health care providers role in adapting their care to better suit the needs of those who

served. The course consists of a weekly didactic given by lecturers experienced in advocating for veteran wellbeing combined with a portion of the class that allows for group discussion. Topics span a variety of subjects from experiences veteran populations may have faced during service to techniques that medical and pharmacy students may use to better connect with veteran patients. This class helps students develop a strong sense of trust with veterans.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the course will only involve medical students in 2021, but we look forward to continuing more programs in the future. The logistics regarding this year's virtual sign up will be available as we approach January. Given that virtually all MCW Milwaukee medical students will spend at least some portion of their rotations at the Zablocki VA Medical Center, taking the time to understand this perspective and diversity of issues surrounding these patients is important to help us serve them better and maximize the quality of care we are able to provide.

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