

## **National Academic Advisory Council Statement on the Role of VA Academic Affiliations**

March 20, 2017

The VA National Academic Affiliations Council was established by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and operates under the provisions of the Federal Advisory Committee Act, as amended, 5 U.S.C. App. 2. The Council's primary purpose is to advise the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Under Secretary for Health on matters affecting the unique partnership between the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the nation's universities, health professional schools and teaching hospitals.

VA has a large and important role in educating future physicians, nurses and other health care professionals. Preparing clinicians who understand and are able to respond to the unique health needs of Veterans wherever they receive care, be it inside or outside VA, is critical to the overall health of the nation. Through a network of thousands of educational partnerships with the nation's academic community, VA trains over 120,000 young health professionals each year, assisting them in developing their clinical skills and in learning from and in caring for Veterans. Over 70% of the physicians and large numbers of other health professionals in the United States today have received a substantial part of their clinical training in VA. Thus, VA conducts its training programs not only for the benefit of Veterans but also for the benefit of the nation as a whole. VA's indispensable educational role is not an accident; indeed, it is specifically included in the law that established these academic partnerships some 70 years ago (*see* Public Law 79-293 and VA Policy Memorandum No. 2, January 30, 1946).

A recurring theme of the National Academic Affiliation Council's work is to reinforce the importance of seamless integration between VA and its academic partners to enhance Veterans' access to health care and the quality, size and distribution of the nation's health care workforce. The Council has long recognized, for example, that health professional schools and teaching hospitals have traditionally offered access to sub-specialty services that VA itself may be unable to provide. Thus, VA's academic affiliates enable greater access to health care and provide the highest caliber, state-of-the-art care for those who have borne the sacrifice. Indeed, these partnerships provide the very backbone of both the VA and the national clinical workforce.

As plans for a new 21<sup>st</sup> Century VA are developed and implemented it will be important to keep in mind the importance of this historic partnership. Irrespective of the ultimate structure and governance of the new VA, the health of our Veterans and that of the nation at large are dependent on continuing this innovative relationship. Maintaining educational and research partnerships between VA and the nation's universities and health professional schools are

important for several reasons. First, some two-thirds of physician trainees and large numbers of other health professionals nationally receive clinical training within the VA health care system, which prepares them for dealing with Veteran-specific issues irrespective of whether they ultimately practice in the public or private health care sectors. Second, partnerships between VA and academic medical centers allow Veterans ready access to clinical advances at the frontiers of healthcare discovery and delivery. And third, for the accreditation requirements of health professional training programs to be met, trainees must train in “approved” facilities; they cannot simply follow patients to any healthcare facility unless stringent faculty and other requirements are met in each and every such facility. It is entirely logical, therefore, that VA’s academic affiliates retain and expand their role in VA’s new health care system, and that research and educational partnerships are maintained and even strengthened in the new system.

Modernization of VA’s health care system will require thoughtful and conjoint planning between VA and its academic partners. Any new plan will inevitably also require extensive and time-consuming statutory and regulatory reform as well as significant VA operational changes. The VA National Academic Advisory Council has endorsed the creation of new and creative strategic partnerships with the academic community. This requires that VA seek legislative authority to engage in joint planning for, and common execution of, “joint ventures” with the academic community as well as with the broader public and private health care sectors. The overall goal of such authority would be the creation of local and regional care networks that serve Veterans and their families in joint clinical facilities. Such authority should allow for leasing of existing clinical space and the development and maintenance of new clinical space when and where necessary. The Council strongly supports VA’s proposal to be given new authority to enter into sole-source leasing agreements with its academic partners. And the Council has further recommended that VA explore and expand partnerships with other federal agencies – such as the Department of Defense, the Health Resources and Services Administration and the Indian Health Service – for the development and joint operation of family centered, primary care sites in underserved rural and urban communities.

In closing, the VA National Academic Affiliations Council emphasizes that the nation cannot afford unintended consequences of VA redesign without first taking into account the many ways in which health care delivery and the clinical workforce could be disrupted. The Council believes that VA’s academic mission, as originally intended by Congress under 38 U.S.C. 7302, must be maintained and even enhanced as new plans for a 21st Century VA are considered.

Veterans and the general public are invited to attend and participate in future meetings of the Council, which are announced in the Federal Register. To be specifically notified of future meetings, please submit your name and contact information to Mr. Stephen Trynosky, the

Council's Designated Federal Officer, at [steve.trynosky@va.gov](mailto:steve.trynosky@va.gov) or (202) 461-6723. Letters addressing aspects of the Council's work are also encouraged at any time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Cox', with a horizontal line underneath.

Malcolm Cox, MD  
Chair, VA National Academic Affiliations Council

cc: Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
Under Secretary for Health, Department of Veterans Affairs  
VA Advisory Committee Management Office