

# LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

## VA corruption a national disgrace

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The Department of Veterans Affairs finally is under intense scrutiny for its bogus waiting lists and the unconscionable treatment delays that have caused an untold number of preventable patient deaths. But new information shows that malfeasance, malpractice and outright corruption within the VA is worse than Americans could have imagined — much worse.

According to a letter sent Monday to President Barack Obama by the Office of Special Counsel, the VA knowingly and repeatedly ignored warnings from whistleblowers about a “troubling pattern” of negligent practices that put patients at risk. “The VA, and particularly the VA’s Office of the Medical Inspector, has consistently used a ‘harmless error’ defense, where the department acknowledges problems but claims patient care is unaffected,” the letter says. “This approach has prevented the VA from acknowledging the severity of systemic problems and from taking the necessary steps to provide quality care to veterans.” In other words, the VA is an unresponsive, unaccountable, excuse-making mess that not only tolerates poor performance, but encourages it.

Additionally, whistleblower Pauline DeWenter told CNN this week that records of dead veterans were being changed at the Phoenix VA hospital — even now, after the VA waiting list and patient death scandal was first exposed — to hide how many veterans died while waiting for care.

Ms. DeWenter, a scheduling clerk at the Phoenix VA, said that beginning last year she was given the job of managing a secret waiting list of veterans waiting for medical care, a list created to hide actual VA wait times and falsely report timely treatment. Many veterans were left on the list for nine months or longer without ever receiving care. The hospital lacked enough doctors to handle new patients, let alone the backlog of existing patients, many of whom were extremely ill. As the secret waiting list grew, Ms. DeWenter said she was forced to make life-and-death decisions regarding which patients would get care and which ones wouldn’t.

On more than one occasion, when Ms. DeWenter would call to let a veteran know that an appointment had become available, she would learn that the patient had died while waiting. Each time, Ms. DeWenter would update the list to reflect the death, but at least seven times since October — *including in recent weeks* — someone else at the VA went in behind Ms. DeWenter and altered the list to show the deceased veterans as alive.

Ms. DeWenter’s allegations back up the claims of a former Phoenix VA physician who in March shed light on the malfeasance. However, a report released Tuesday by Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., shows that corruption within the VA is much wider and dates back to well before the Phoenix scandal.

According to Sen. Coburn's report, negligent care has cost taxpayers nearly \$1 billion in malpractice settlements over the past decade and may have killed up to 1,000 veterans. Many of the details are both tragic and infuriating — including the case of a former security chief at a New York VA who was arrested by the FBI after he had plotted to kidnap, rape, and murder women and children.

Meanwhile, the Office of Special Counsel letter documents the shocking neglect of two veterans housed at the VA long-term psychiatric hospital in Brockton, Mass. According to the letter, one veteran was held for more than eight years before receiving a comprehensive evaluation, and the other waited more than seven years after admission for an initial exam. At other facilities, schedulers who refused to go along with the scam faced retribution, according to the letter.

Despite the fact that books have been cooked and veterans have died, all of the 470 senior executives at the VA — every single one — have received “fully successful” job ratings from the agency over the past four years. At least 65 percent of the executives also received financial “performance awards” — bonuses awarded to them, at least in part, based on the agency's deadly ruse.

Americans will pay more than \$150 billion in 2014 for this disgrace, making the VA the fifth-largest federal agency in terms of spending, according to the Cato Institute.

Enough is enough. The department's secretary has resigned and other VA officials have been removed. But those actions don't go nearly far enough for an agency with a culture that emphasizes doing the wrong thing. Where were the grown-ups? If nothing else, this scandal reveals the incredibly selfish, vengeful and remorseless nature of the federal bureaucracy, and the power of fear in covering up wrongdoing. Let this nightmare forever put to rest the idea that nationalized medicine is the most benevolent, compassionate and fair health care system in the world.

Hundreds of VA administrators and employees should be fired, then the entire agency should be abolished, its facilities and services fully privatized. Veterans need to be able to seek care at any hospital or physician office of their choosing. And they need to be able to do it now — before it's too late.