



Return VA to its core mission: Another view

By: Michael Tanner

June 29, 2014

If there's one thing all Americans can agree on, it's that we owe our veterans the care they need to treat injuries suffered while serving their country.

But Congress and the organized veterans groups have stretched that vital mission into massive bureaucracy that builds and owns hospitals, hires doctors and provides care directly to millions of veterans, regardless of whether their illnesses are service-related.

In the wake of the Veterans Affairs scandal, we may be tempted to believe that the system can be fixed by changing leaders or simply spending more money. But spending for the VA health system has risen eight times faster since 2007 than the number of unique patients. And the problems go back decades.

The real solution lies in putting veterans themselves, rather than government, in charge of their health care.

First, veterans with service-connected illnesses should have the option of going outside the department for care. Yes, some combat injuries require specialized treatment that only the VA system can easily provide, but others can be treated elsewhere.

The VA already allows the outsourcing of care in some cases, but that decision is made by the same VA administrators who have been responsible for the delays in the first place. It shouldn't be up to bureaucrats.

Every veteran with a service-connected injury should have the right to seek treatment from any doctor or facility. That might be a family physician or a nationally renowned specialist. Either way, the VA should merely pay the bills, much like Medicare.

More important, we should return the VA health care system to its core mission of treating service-related injuries. At a time when those injured in combat are waiting for care, it is ridiculous that more than half of VA patients today are being treated for non-service-connected illnesses or injuries.

A soldier who lost his leg to an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan is different from a vet who served stateside during peacetime. We owe both gratitude. But benefits should be reserved for the one who bled for us. Our wounded warriors deserve the best. They also deserve to be more than a source of pork and entitlement for the Washington establishment.

Michael Tanner is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute.