The Organization of Health Services Research in the Veterans Administration

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The VA health services research, development, and education efforts are organized in four main programs: (1) the Intramural Research Program, (2) the VA-University Health Services Research Affiliation Program, (3) the Health Services Research Training Program, and (4) the Contract Research Program. This report first describes the administrative location and structure of the Health Services Research and Development Service within the VA Department of Medicine and Surgery. Then the goals, organizational structure, and major activities of each program are presented.

VA ORGANIZATION

The organizational unit primarily responsible for managing health services research within the VA is the Health Services Research and Development Service. This unit, the Medical Research Service, and the Rehabilitative Engineering Research and Development Service are the three components of the office of the assistant chief medical director for research and development in the VA Department of Medicine and Surgery.

The responsibilities of the Health Services R & D Service are broad. They include the identification of health services research problems and their relative priorities, the solicitation for and review of proposals, the funding and monitoring of R & D projects, the assessment of R & D product utilization and impact, and the development of health services research capacity within the VA health care system. The purposes and responsibilities of the VA Health Services R & D Services are thus compatible with those of the HHS National Center for Health Services Research. The VA, however, possesses unique facilities for conducting research within its own clinical system. Accordingly, VA research funding is oriented primarily to VA

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facilities and scientists, and research priorities relate directly to the mission of the VA health care system.

The VA Central Office Health Services R & D staff located in Washington, D.C., is multidisciplinary. In addition to physicians and nurses, the staff includes psychologists, social workers, sociologists, management analysts, education specialists, and data-processing experts. The professional staff consists of about a dozen persons and is oriented primarily to program development and management. Most health services research within the VA is thus conducted by investigators located at or closely affiliated with VA hospitals or other field facilities.

INTRAMURAL RESEARCH

The purpose of the Health Services R & D Intramural Research Program is to provide resources for the design and execution of health services research by VA investigators. The intramural program is open to VA professional services staff, management and administrative specialists, and other interested VA staff. During the past several years, the greatest response to the intramural research program has been from nurses, physicians, social workers, psychologists, and information scientists. Research problems may include studies relating to the planning, organization, financing, provision, and evaluation of health services.

Information concerning research priorities is communicated to VA field personnel by several means. These include convening of regional VA research meetings, special conferences focused on specific topics, and individual consultation between Washington staff and field scientists and clinicians. Another important mechanism for conveying research priorities is distribution of internal notices known as Research and Development Letters. Among the research areas identified in recent letters are theoretical and practical problems in the delivery of ambulatory care, consequences of regionalization of VA hospital management, and evaluation of education programs for VA medical and allied health personnel. In addition to research topics suggested by the Washington Health Services R & D Service, investigator-identified and initiated projects are encouraged.

The review and approval process for Health Services R & D research projects is similar to that used by NIH in its peer review process. The VA intramural research project is first reviewed by the local VA hospital. This process includes review by the hospital director. If approved, the project is submitted to Washington, where it is reviewed for scientific merit by a panel of scientists. If it is approved for scientific merit, a final administrative review is conducted by the Veterans Administration. In general, the intramural project approval rate is between 10 and 30%, a range similar to the project approval rate for the National Center for Health Services Research. The intramural submission, review, and funding process is described in detail in VA Circular 10-77-29.

At present several dozen health services research projects have been approved and funded. These projects include topics such as medical and economic aspects of clinical decision making, evaluation of geriatric treatment environments, health services utilization of Spanish-speaking and/or Spanish-surnamed veterans, evaluation of substance-abuse treatments, social and psychological factors in successful home