

Arizona veterans' hospital scandal: Forty patients died awaiting treatment

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Over the past two weeks, whistle-blowers have confirmed that a Veterans Affairs medical center in Phoenix, Arizona allowed 40 patients to die while awaiting treatment. The whistleblowers also accused the medical center of keeping a secret waiting list to cover up delays. Since then, the scandal has continued to spread, implicating another VA hospital in Texas.

The scandal originated with a CNN interview with Dr. Sam Foote, who recently retired after 24 years of service at the Phoenix hospital. He stated that the hospital maintained two waiting lists: one fake list was maintained for official purposes, and another secret list was maintained that showed the true delays for over 1,600 patients waiting for treatment. Some patients waited over a year to get an appointment with a doctor, well beyond the 14 or 30 days recommended by medical experts.

A second employee, Dr. Katherine Mitchell, came forward after the Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki announced an investigation. She had been notified by a fellow employee that hospital officials were shredding documents after being ordered to preserve all documents associated with the investigation.

Dr. Mitchell claims VA officials retaliated against her for complaining about the illegal cover-up.

One of the tragic deaths was 71-year-old retired navy serviceman Thomas Breen, who was rushed to the hospital in September 2013 by his son and daughter-in-law because of blood in his urine. The emergency room doctor examined him and sent him home with an urgent order for an appointment with his primary care physician or urologist within a week. He was being treated for bladder cancer.

Mr. Breen's appointment was never scheduled despite repeated calls by his daughter-in-law, Sallie

Eliano, who was told it could take up to seven months for an appointment. She was told to be patient because there were many others who needed urgent care and were also waiting. A week after Mr. Breen died in November of 2013, Ms. Eliano was told he had been scheduled to meet with a doctor.

Shinseki placed Phoenix VA Director Sharon Helman, Associate Director Lance Robinson, and a third unidentified employee on administrative leave. The scandal, however, points to problems that run much deeper than a few individuals.

Brain Turner, a scheduling clerk from San Antonio, Texas, has asked for whistleblower protection since he went public with allegations he was told to falsify records to conceal wait times at another VA hospital.

When Mr. Turner began sending emails to his fellow employees with his concerns, he was brought into his supervisor's office and told to stop sending emails. The VA public affairs office claimed it conducted an investigation into these allegations and found them unsubstantiated.

Turner says he was never interviewed by public affairs, but that he has been interviewed by the Office of the Inspector General.

Shinseki, who presides over the investigation, has refused to resign. President Obama has declined requests to fire him from his position.

Various right-wing commentators and politicians have seized on the scandal for their own purposes such as to posture as friends of veterans, to make the case against government "bureaucracy" and to argue in favor of the further privatization of health care. Criticism has also been leveled at government supervisors who received generous salaries and bonuses while patients were dying.

For example, while she presided over these atrocious

conditions, Helman received a \$9,345 bonus last year on top of her salary of \$169,900. It has since emerged that Helman was transferred to Arizona after she was caught falsifying medical records in a Spokane, Washington hospital's service area. From July 2007 to July 2008, 22 veterans committed suicide in the area, but under her direction the hospital reported nine.

Notwithstanding the political posturing that surrounds it, the Arizona VA scandal lays bare the deteriorating and increasingly corrupt American health care system. The scandal also exposes the fact that, despite the endless paeans to America's "military heroes" and "our brave men and women in uniform," soldiers are tossed aside like so much garbage after they have served their purpose.

According to Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), a bill last February that would have opened up as many as 27 new VA health clinics was voted down in Congress.



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