

VA scandal in US exposes disastrous state of veteran health care

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A series of recent leaks exposing the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as complicit in denying treatment to and causing the deaths of veterans at a medical center in Phoenix, Arizona have developed into a significant political crisis for the Obama administration.

So far, the affair has claimed the career of Undersecretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Petzel and has prompted calls for the resignation of VA Secretary and former Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki, who was forced under pressure to testify before Congress last Thursday.

Republicans are exploiting the scandal for their own purposes, attempting to posture as defenders of veterans. “We should all be ashamed,” Republican Senator John McCain, a leading supporter of every significant military operation carried out by the United States, said in a radio address over the weekend.

In fact, the revelations over the treatment of veterans are a damning indictment of the Obama administration and the entire political establishment, exposing the cynical character of the constant militarist drum-beating carried out in the name of “supporting the troops.” The American ruling class treats ordinary soldiers as so much cannon fodder, to be discarded after they have served their purpose.

The current scandal developed after a series of exposures made by present and former employees of the VA detailed the procedure by which the department denies healthcare to veterans and then covers-up these actions by means of a complex book-cooking scheme.

On April 30, Dr. Sam Foote, a retired doctor at the Phoenix VA medical center, revealed the existence of a “scheme” which was “deliberately put in place to avoid the VA’s own internal rules.” In an interview with CNN, Foote explained that VA administrators

“developed the secret waiting list” that is used by the VA to cover up for the fact that roughly 40 veterans have died after waiting for treatment for months or years.

In the following weeks, further whistle-blowers from medical centers in Texas and Colorado stepped forward and made similar allegations regarding VA wrongdoing.

According to an April 2010 memorandum filed by lower-level VA officials to their higher-ups, practices employed by the agency include:

- * canceling appointments when patients do not check-in 15 minutes early and thereby forcing patients who show up on-time or minutes early to reschedule appointments for weeks in the future.

- * sending confirmation emails to patients, and if the patient does not respond, the VA “reserves the right” to cancel the appointment.

- * scheduling patient appointments, canceling them, and entering the appointment into records as “cancelled by patient” instead of “cancelled by clinic” so that patients are sent to the bottom of the waitlist instead of being given preferential treatment.

- * scheduling appointments with patients during times that the patients have stated they are unavailable, thereby forcing the patients to cancel and moving them to the back of the waiting list.

- * scheduling appointments for a patient without notifying them and thereby “creat[ing] a very high likelihood that the patient will no-show which allows for another rebooking with a restarted wait time.”

- * canceling and then re-establishing appointments on the same day in order to give the appearance that the patient’s wait time is minimal.

On top of the complex schedule-manipulation tactics, the VA also falls back on a more simple method for

covering-up treatment denial. Dr. Katherine Mitchell, a VA doctor, recently disclosed that VA officials were caught shredding documents that detail wrongdoing.

The Obama administration has responded by denying the existence of wrongdoing and scrambling to minimize the scandal. Shinseki told the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs on May 15 in conditional terms that “*if* these allegations are true” and “*if* they are substantiated,” then “they are completely unacceptable” and “timely action will be taken.”

Shinseki and Obama both issued choreographed statements in recent days stating that they were “mad as hell” (Shinseki) and “madder than hell” (Obama). Despite the feigned anger, nothing will be done to improve health care for veterans. After all, had it not been for a series of whistle-blowers at a widening series of VA medical centers, the executive branch would have continued to ignore the issue outright as they have been doing for years.

This is typified by the pro-forma statement issued by the White House last week, which read: “America has a sacred trust with the men and women who have served our country in uniform and he [Obama] is committed to doing all we can to ensure our veterans have access to timely, quality health care.”

But the unfolding crisis makes clear that the American ruling class is not, in fact, moved by a desire to “honor” military veterans except with condescending jingoist verbiage. Not only are veterans regularly denied the care they need, but the recent leaks reveal that the VA carries out a well-oiled cover-up to keep this fact a secret.

Deteriorating health care for veterans is not a new phenomenon, and poor living conditions amongst veterans are widespread. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that roughly 60,000 veterans are homeless on a given night, with 1.4 million at risk of homelessness.

Mental health issues are also widespread among veterans. A VA study released in 2012 showed that a US veteran kills him or herself every 80 minutes. There are more soldier suicides in a single year than soldiers killed-in-action during the entire “global war on terror.” Government-sponsored suicide hotlines receive hundreds of thousands of calls each year.

The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular

have produced over 1 million wounded veterans who have been processed by the VA system.

To the American ruling class, the millions of surviving soldiers who have already served their purpose in the military operations of US imperialism cost more when they are alive than when they are dead.



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