

White House hit by scandal over veterans' health care

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The press briefing conducted by President Obama Wednesday morning was a desperate effort to evade responsibility for the appalling conditions that have been revealed at Veterans Administration hospitals in many parts of the United States.

The VA health system is the largest in the US, with 1,700 hospitals, clinics and other care facilities, and the only one run directly by the federal government. It has been staggered by the influx of hundreds of thousands of Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans, many with severe wounds and psychological problems. At the same time, care has been undermined by cuts in spending imposed as part of a series of bipartisan budget deals in Washington.

The current furor erupted after a whistleblower at the VA medical center in Phoenix, Arizona alleged that 40 veterans had died while waiting to receive care, and that the facility maintained two separate waiting lists—one that recorded accurately how long patients had been waiting for treatment, the other designed to make the hospital look like it was meeting a newly imposed requirement that most patients should wait less than 14 days to see a doctor.

The political pressure on the White House came to a head this week, after the top VA official, retired Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki, made a widely criticized appearance on Capitol Hill, in which he downplayed the scale and seriousness of the double bookkeeping and seemed indifferent to criticisms from veterans' advocates.

This was followed by the admission Tuesday by the VA's Office of Inspector General that the number of facilities being investigated for delays in treating patients or falsification of records has more than doubled, from ten to twenty-six. At least eight of these facilities are accused of maintaining separate waiting

lists.

There has been an explosion of local and national media reports on waiting times and double bookkeeping. NBC News reported Wednesday evening on the VA hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It showed the electronic data entry form for patients, which actually has two different data fields, "Patient Waiting Time 1" and "Patient Waiting Time 2," in which to record the spurious and the actual length of time patients wait for treatment.

On Wednesday morning, Obama met with Shinseki behind closed doors at the White House, then went before the press to announce that his deputy chief of staff, Rob Nabors, would fly to Phoenix that day to assess the situation there. White House chief of staff Denis McDonough went to Capitol Hill to meet with congressional leaders, including the chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Senator Bernard Sanders, independent of Vermont.

Obama went before television cameras without Shinseki, in what was a transparent attempt to distance himself from the crisis and set the top VA official up as a potential scapegoat as more revelations emerge about poor care and falsification of records.

As usual with Obama, he spoke first about his role as Commander-in-Chief, citing "the honor of standing with our men and women in uniform at every step of their service," and claiming—without displaying the slightest genuine emotion—that "the most searing moments of my presidency have been going to Walter Reed, or Bethesda, or Bagram and meeting troops who have left a part of themselves on the battlefield."

He continued, "So when I hear allegations of misconduct—any misconduct—whether it's allegations of VA staff covering up long wait times or cooking the books, I will not stand for it... If these allegations prove

to be true, it is dishonorable, it is disgraceful, and I will not tolerate it—period.”

Candidate Obama used almost identical rhetoric in 2007, when he criticized the dismal record of the Bush administration on care for veterans. “When a veteran is denied health care, we are all dishonored,” he said. “When 400,000 veterans are stuck on a waiting list for claims, we need a new sense of urgency in this country. As president, I won’t stand for hundreds of thousands of veterans waiting for benefits.”

Once in office, the Obama administration engaged in a massive publicity campaign to portray his administration as uniquely sensitive to the needs of veterans, spearheaded by joint appearances on the part of Michelle Obama and Jill Biden, the vice president’s wife. Under Obama, however, the claims waiting list swelled to more than 600,000, reduced to “only” 300,000 last year, although that figure is likely to be as dubious as the figures on waiting times for patient care.

Obama concluded his remarks to the press by downplaying the scale of the problem, noting, “there are 85 million appointments scheduled among veterans during the course of a year. That’s a lot of appointments... This is a big system with a lot of really good people in it who care about our veterans deeply.”

VA spending increased by 88 percent during the Bush administration. This increase fell far short of meeting the needs of the mushrooming number of wounded and traumatized veterans.

Spending has risen a further 78 percent during the first six years of the Obama administration, reaching \$150 billion, but that rise was interrupted in Fiscal Year 2012 (October 1, 2011 to September 30, 2012), when the bipartisan Budget Control Act reduced the budget for the VA by 2.2 percent.

The resources devoted to veterans’ benefits and health care have failed, however, to keep up with the tidal wave of human need. This includes both the 2.6 million US soldiers who fought in Iraq or Afghanistan over the past 13 years—the longest period of continuous military conflict in American history—and millions more, mainly Vietnam-era veterans, now entering old age.

The harrowing conditions that are now developing in the VA system were detailed in a report in the *Washington Post* Wednesday, the sixth in a multi-part series on the conditions of life facing Iraq and

Afghanistan veterans.

The article profiled Army Staff Sergeant Sam Shockley, horribly wounded in Afghanistan when he stepped on a buried bomb that tore off both his legs. He has undergone more than 40 surgeries, and has so many injuries to so many parts of his body that a claims processor has to go through a checklist to record them all.

The report describes the intake interview, in which the wounded veteran is handed an Excel spreadsheet that lists the going rate for veterans compensation for the terrible injuries suffered by so many soldiers in both wars—wounds that in previous wars would inevitably have meant death on the battlefield.

The report notes: “The loss of a single foot, hand or eye is worth \$101.50 a month. Two missing legs can generate an additional payment of about \$1,000-\$1,300 a month. Missing arms are worth an extra \$1,600-\$1,800.”



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