

A Tale of Two News Reports

On Wednesday, February 25, 2015 two new stories aired, one on National Public Radio (NPR) that I heard riding home that afternoon and the other later in the evening on the CBS Evening News with Scott Pelley. Both stories were on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) but I was struck by the contrasting style of the two reports.

The first story was an NPR report on back injuries in nurses (1). According to the report nurses suffer more back injuries than almost any other occupation — and they get those injuries mainly from doing the everyday tasks of lifting and moving patients. The report stated that the VA has invested over \$200 million in protecting nurses predominately by providing lifts and other devices for moving patients. VA hospitals across the country have reduced nursing injuries from moving patients by an average of 40 percent since the program started. The reduction at the Loma Linda hospital where the report was focused was closer to 30 percent — but the injuries that employees suffered were less serious than they used to be. Loma Linda spent almost \$1 million during a recent four-year period just to hire replacements for employees who got hurt so badly they had to go home. However, this past year they spent nothing because according to the report nobody got hurt badly enough to miss work.

The VA's reputation for accurate information has been called into question. The Phoenix VA was the ground zero of an investigation which eventually discovered that about 70% of VA hospitals were falsifying patient waiting reports (2). Perhaps everything in this NPR report is true, however, the NPR report reminded me of so many I heard over the past two decades where any medical report was accepted by the media at face value. Many of the reports I knew were not true because I worked at the VA. There are several reasons to be skeptical. First, it is from the VA. Second, the director of the Loma Linda VA was Donald F. Moore until late 2012. Prior to that position Moore had been the director of the Phoenix VA. Third, the reported drop in injuries borders on the unbelievable. Nursing supervisors likely need to get approval to replace injured nurses. Perhaps a directive either not to report any back injuries or that approval of replacement nurses would not be granted was issued. There are many ways to falsify the data, but NPR was nonquestioning in their report.

Later that evening CBS Evening News correspondent Wyatt Andrews reported that he found widespread mismanagement of VA claims. The mismanagement resulted in veterans being denied the benefits they earned, and many even dying before they get an answer from the VA (3). Five whistleblowers at the Oakland, California, Veterans Benefits office told CBS News that more than 13,000 claims filed between 1996 and 2009 ended up stashed in a file cabinet and ignored until 2012. VA supervisors in Oakland ordered marking the claims "no action necessary" and to toss them aside. Whistleblowers said that was illegal. Last week, the VA inspector general confirmed that because of, "poor record keeping" In Oakland, "veterans did not receive... benefits to which they may have been entitled." How many veterans is not known, because thousands of records were missing when inspectors arrived. In the last year, the inspector general has found serious issues in at least six VA benefits offices, including

unprocessed claims in Philadelphia, 9,500 records sitting on employees' desks in Baltimore and computer manipulation in Houston to make claims look completed when they were not. VA Central Office said in a statement, "...electronic claims processing [has] transformed mail management for compensation claims ... greatly minimizing any risk of delays due to lost or misplaced mail...For any deficiencies identified, steps are taken to appropriately process the documents and correct any deficiencies." Much of this sounded very familiar and similar to the patient wait times the VA falsified last year.

The CBS report closed with a statement from the Veterans service organization Veteran Warriors, which advocates for veterans who are having difficulty with their claims. The Veteran Warriors said in a statement: "Too many cases have come to light, wherein the VA leaders have destroyed, deleted, hidden and manipulated veterans claims - their very access to benefits and services - and NOT ONE OF THEM has been criminally charged. It is time for our nations' leaders to stop listening to the endless "lip service" of accountability and demand answers. If they do not get them, it is time for repercussions to be felt by those who obviously believe they are above the law and insulated from prosecution." It was clear that the Veteran Warriors did not believe the VA and also clear that neither did CBS News.

The weak reporting on medical issues has been apparent to me for some time. The CBS report suggests that this may be changing. The VA scandal may point out that medical reports need to be questioned just like other news stories. Truthfulness does matter and the VA continually blaming clerks and other lower level employees for administrative inadequacies or attacking the whistleblower has become tedious. Even the present inspector general's report blamed the closing of the Veterans claims on "poor record keeping". In this instance CBS news was doing their job questioning the VA but NPR was not.

Richard A. Robbins, MD
Editor
SWJPCC

References

1. Zwerdling D. At VA hospitals, training and technology reduce nurses' injuries. NPR. February 25, 2015. Available at: <http://www.npr.org/2015/02/25/387298633/at-va-hospitals-training-and-technology-reduce-nurses-injuries> (accessed 3/7/15).
2. Robbins RA. A veterans day editorial: change at the VA? Southwest J Pulm Crit Care. 2014;9(5):281-3. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
3. CBS News. Whistleblowers: Veterans cheated out of benefits. February 25, 2015. Available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/veteran-benefits-administration-mismanagement-uncovered-in-investigation/> (accessed 3/7/15).