



**Department of Veterans Affairs  
Office of Inspector General**

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**Healthcare Inspection**

**Surgical Service Issues  
Alaska VA Healthcare System and  
Regional Office,  
Anchorage, Alaska**

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**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**Office of Inspector General**  
**Washington, DC 20420**

**TO:** VISN 20 Acting Director

**SUBJECT:** Healthcare Inspection – Surgical Service Issues Alaska VA Healthcare System and Regional Office, Anchorage, Alaska

### **Purpose**

The VA Office of Inspector General's Office of Healthcare Inspections initiated an inspection in response to a request from Senator Ted Stevens to review allegations from an anonymous complainant concerning surgical service. The complainant alleged that a non-physician performing the functions of the Chief of Surgical Service is inappropriate, and the facility's sharing agreement with Elmendorf Air Force Base does not serve VA patients' surgical needs. The purpose of the inspection was to determine whether the allegations had merit.

### **Background**

The Alaska VA Healthcare System (the facility) in Anchorage, Alaska, operates a large outpatient clinic in Anchorage and smaller clinics in Fairbanks and Kenai, which together logged 90,921 patient visits in fiscal year (FY) 2004. The facility also participates with Elmendorf Air Force Base in a joint venture hospital (JVH) for inpatient care. In FY 2004, 743 veterans received JVH inpatient care. The facility provided staffing for the JVH intensive care unit, while the Air Force provided all other staffing. Ambulatory procedures were performed at both the facility and the JVH; however, more complex procedures likely to result in an inpatient stay were performed only at the JVH. In FY 2004, VA clinicians performed 1,410 procedures at the facility and 243 procedures at the JVH. The facility is under the jurisdiction of VISN 20.

## Scope and Methodology

We visited the facility from July 18-22, 2005. We interviewed the Chief of Staff (COS), Chief of Surgical Service, three staff surgeons, a podiatrist, and a physician assistant. We reviewed relevant VHA Directives, personnel files, credentialing and privileging files, JVH memorandums, and minutes from the JVH Business Operations Committee.

We conducted the inspection in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Inspections* published by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

## Inspection Results

### **Issue 1: Having a non-physician performing the functions of the Chief of Surgical Service is inappropriate.**

We substantiated the allegation. For the past 4 years, a physician assistant has served as the Chief of Surgical Service, a position commonly held by surgeons. Prior to that time, a surgeon served in the position. The previous Chief of Surgical Service told us that he preferred patient care to administrative work and asked to change from Chief to staff surgeon. When none of the other staff physicians responded to the Chief position opportunity, the COS designated the physician assistant as service chief.

Physician assistants are health care professionals licensed to practice medicine with physician supervision. Physician assistants' responsibilities include conducting physical exams, diagnosing and treating illnesses, and assisting in surgery.

As the Chief of Surgical Service, the physician assistant signed annual proficiency reports as the rating official and provided the service chief review and recommendation for biennial reprivileging. The COS, an internist, told us that she provided clinical oversight, as needed. The COS stated that she has been comfortable with this arrangement and that the Chief of Surgical Service has successfully performed his duties.

Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) standards and VHA directives require all medical staff service chiefs to be board-certified physicians. The National Director of VA Surgery told us that facility surgical service chiefs should be surgeons and that he knows of no other VA facility where the position is filled with a non-physician. He also stated that when a Chief of Surgical Service vacancy exists, the candidate selected to fill the vacancy should be vetted by the National Director of VA Surgery. The COS told us that she was not aware of this practice and did not submit her selection of the physician assistant as Chief of Surgical Service to the National Director of VA Surgery for vetting.

**Issue 2: The JVH does not serve VA patients' surgical needs.**

We substantiated the allegation. The complainant told us that several conditions exist to make performing surgery at the JVH difficult, including provision of supplies and operating room (OR) time. While the members of the surgical staff acknowledged problems in the past with the provision of the supplies needed for their procedures, they stated that the situation was addressed and has improved over the past year.

VA surgeons share in the on-call schedule and receive OR time of approximately 1 day per week (2 days per month each for general surgery and orthopedic surgery). The two general surgeons told us that this amount of OR time is suitable to accommodate their patients' care needs. However, the orthopedic surgeon reported that approximately 95 patients are awaiting orthopedic surgery.

The topic of OR access/usage has been discussed at each monthly meeting of the JVH Business Operation Committee for the past year. The facility was represented on this committee by the Associate Director, the COS, and the Chief Nurse Executive. The COS told us that the JVH has received FY 2005 funds to open and staff an additional OR suite, which will provide more OR time for VA surgeons. VA patients' surgical needs have been met, although not very timely for orthopedic patients. It appears that the situation will improve in the near future; therefore, we made no recommendation regarding the JVH.

## **Conclusions**

It is not appropriate for a physician assistant to hold the position of Chief of Surgical Service because it is inconsistent with JCAHO standards and VHA directives and practices. One of the staff surgeons could be designated as service chief with administrative support provided by other staff, possibly the physician assistant currently serving as chief.

The JVH serves general surgery patients' needs and some orthopedic patients' needs. Once additional OR time becomes available, orthopedic patients will be treated in a more timely manner.

## **Recommendation**

The VISN Director needs to ensure that the facility Director designates a board-certified surgeon as the Chief of Surgical Service.

## **Healthcare System and Regional Office Director Comments**

The Healthcare System and Regional Office Director concurred with the recommendation. The position for a board-certified surgeon is being posted in house. If no internal applications are received, a board-certified surgical service physician will be appointed to the position of Chief of Surgical Service.

## **Inspector General's Comments**

The Healthcare System and Regional Office Director agreed with the recommendation and provided an acceptable implementation plan. We will monitor the implementation of this recommendation.

*(original signed by:)*

**JOHN D. DAIGH, JR., M.D.**  
Assistant Inspector General for  
Healthcare Inspections

## Healthcare System and Regional Office Director Comments

**Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

**Memorandum**

**Date:** September 7, 2005

**From:** Director, Alaska VA Healthcare System and Regional Office  
(00/463)

**Subject:** Surgical Service Issues at the Alaska VA Healthcare System  
and Regional Office, Anchorage, Alaska

**To:** VISN 20 Acting Director

1. The following information is provided in response to the IG's recommendation relating to the Surgical Service Issues Inspection of July 18-22, 2005:

Issue: Having a non-physician performing the functions of the Chief of Surgical Service is inappropriate.

Recommendation: The VISN Director needs to ensure that the facility Director designates a board-certified surgeon as the Chief of Surgical Service.

Concur with recommendation.

Planned Action: The position for a board-certified surgeon is being posted in house for all board certified surgeons to apply. If no internal applications are received, a board-certified surgical service physician will be appointed to the position of Chief, Surgery Service.

Target: December 1, 2005.

2. If you have questions, please contact my Quality Manager, Marjorie King, at (907) 257-5441. Thank you.

*(original signed by:)*

Alex Spector

## OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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OIG Contact	Julie Watrous, Director, Los Angeles Office of Healthcare Inspections (310) 268-3005
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