



Highlights of [GAO-05-64](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Servicemembers who leave the military and file disability claims with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) may be subject to potentially duplicative physical exams in order to meet requirements of both the Department of Defense's (DOD) military services and VA. To streamline the process for these servicemembers, the military services and VA have attempted to coordinate their physical exam requirements by developing a single separation exam program. In 1998, VA and DOD signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) instructing local units to establish single separation exam programs. This report examines (1) VA's and the military services' efforts to establish single separation exam programs, and (2) the challenges to establishing single separation exam programs. To obtain this information, GAO interviewed VA and military service officials about establishing the program; evaluated existing programs at selected military installations; and visited selected installations that did not have programs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Secretaries of VA and Defense develop systems to monitor and track the progress of VA regional offices and military installations in implementing single separation exam programs. VA and DOD concurred with GAO's findings and recommendation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-64.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Marcia Crosse at (202) 512-7119.

VA AND DOD HEALTH CARE

Efforts to Coordinate a Single Physical Exam Process for Servicemembers Leaving the Military

What GAO Found

Since 1998, VA and the military services have collaborated to establish single separation exam programs. However, while we were able to verify that the program was being delivered at some military installations, DOD, its military services, and VA either could not provide information on program locations or provided us with inaccurate information. As of May 2004, VA reported that 28 military installations had single separation exam programs that used one of five basic approaches to deliver an exam that met both VA's and the military services' requirements. However, when we evaluated 8 of the 28 installations, we found that 4 of the installations did not actually have programs in place. Nonetheless, VA and DOD leadership continue to encourage the establishment of single separation exam programs and have recently drafted a new memorandum of agreement (MOA) that is intended to replace the 1998 MOU. Like the original MOU, the draft MOA delegates responsibility for establishing single separation exam programs to local VA and military installations, depending on available resources. However, the draft MOA also contains a specific implementation goal that selected military installations should have single separation exam programs in place by December 31, 2004. This would require implementation at 139 installations—an ambitious plan given the seemingly low rate of program implementation since 1998 and the lack of accurate information on existing programs.

Several challenges impede the establishment of single separation exam programs. The predominant challenge is that the military services may not benefit from a program designed to eliminate the need for two separate physical exams because they usually do not require that servicemembers receive a separation exam. As of August 2004, only the Army had a general separation exam requirement for retiring servicemembers. The other military services primarily require separation exams when the servicemember's last physical exam or medical assessment received during active duty is no longer considered current. In fiscal year 2003, only an estimated 13 percent of servicemembers who left the military received a separation exam. Consequently, the military services may not realize resource savings by eliminating or sharing responsibility for this exam. According to some military officials, another challenge to establishing single separation exam programs is that resources, such as facility space and medical personnel, are needed for other priorities, such as ensuring that active duty servicemembers are healthy enough to perform their duties. Additionally, because single separation exam programs require coordination between personnel from both VA and the military services, military staff changes, including those due to routine rotations, can make it difficult to maintain existing programs.