

Highlights of GAO-20-211, a report to the Ranking Member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In addition to providing health care services, VA funds research on veterans' health conditions, including chronic conditions (such as diabetes) as well as illnesses and injuries resulting from military service (such as TBI). VA's ORD manages the agency's research program, including its intramural research. In fiscal year 2018, VA resources for its intramural research program included an appropriation of \$722 million.

GAO was asked to review aspects of VA's research program. In this report, which focuses on VA's intramural research, GAO describes 1) how VA sets priorities for funding research, 2) VA efforts to facilitate translation of research into clinical practice, and 3) coordination between VA's research program and other VA entities.

To perform this work, GAO reviewed VA policies, reports, and other documents about VA research efforts. GAO also interviewed officials from ORD, three VA national clinical program offices, and two VA offices that focus on implementing evidence-based practices. In addition, GAO conducted site visits with four VA medical centers. GAO selected those locations because they house VA-funded research centers that focus on a range of topics and ORD programs that focus on disseminating and translating research. At each location, GAO interviewed medical center officials and VA researchers. GAO also reviewed VA summary data on research projects and funding for fiscal year 2018.

VA provided technical comments on a draft of this report, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

View GAO-20-211. For more information, contact Jessica Farb at (202) 512-7114 or farbj@gao.gov.

January 2020

VA HEALTH CARE

Efforts to Prioritize and Translate Research into Clinical Practice

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) uses stakeholder input and other information to set priorities for funding research projects. VA's Office of Research and Development (ORD) manages VA's intramural research program—that is, research funded by and conducted within VA, by VA researchers. To set priorities, ORD considers input from VA and non-VA stakeholders (such as agency leaders and a federal research advisory council, respectively) and data on veterans' health conditions. ORD encourages VA researchers to study—and collaborate with other VA researchers on—priority topics, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI).

Examples of Veterans Affairs (VA) Intramural Research Projects on Priority Topics

PTSD and TBI	Spinal cord injury
Studies on the long-term effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mild traumatic brain injury (TBI), and a program to help veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan strengthen behavioral and emotional skills.	Studies on using exoskeletons—motorized prostheses worn outside a person's clothes—to help veterans walk in rehabilitation, home, and community settings; improving arm, leg, and bowel function; and addressing low blood pressure.



VA research participant with a spinal cord injury uses an exoskeleton.

Source: VA (information and photo). | GAO-20-211

ORD's Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) and other VA entities facilitate translating research findings into clinical practice to improve care for veterans. QUERI is VA's central point of focus for research translation and provides a link between ORD, VA program offices, and providers. For example, one QUERI program is studying delivery of an evidence-based treatment for PTSD using telemedicine, specifically, by providing psychotherapy via video to veterans in rural areas. Another program recently adopted a new research translation strategy by establishing a requirement that research proposals for large, multi-center clinical trials include an implementation plan. VA officials said the goal of the new requirement is to encourage researchers to think about research translation from the beginning of a study—and how their work might be translated into practice.

VA officials from both ORD and the national program offices GAO spoke with described a variety of efforts coordinating on research. Such coordination can help inform research priorities and help program offices incorporate evidence-based practices in developing and rolling out national policies. For example, ORD officials said that VA researchers were serving as subject matter experts to the national program office developing a protocol and clinical guidelines for a new treatment for certain veterans with depression that is resistant to existing treatments.