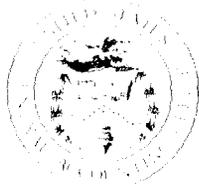


GAO

May 1989

# VA HEALTH CARE

## Few Veterans Denied Care at Florida Clinics



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Human Resources Division

B-232912

May 31, 1989

The Honorable Alan Cranston, Chairman  
The Honorable Frank H. Murkowski, Ranking  
Minority Member  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable G. V. Montgomery, Chairman  
The Honorable Bob Stump, Ranking  
Minority Member  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
House of Representatives

In your March 18, 1988, letter, you expressed concern that Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) clinics might be denying care to large numbers of veterans who apply for outpatient medical care in high-demand areas. As agreed with your offices, we visited 4 of the 14 VA clinics in Florida, which VA considers to be a high-demand area. The four clinics received 66,365 applications for outpatient medical care from veterans during fiscal year 1988. At each clinic, we reviewed a random sample of applications to determine (1) how many veterans were denied care and (2) why care was denied.

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## Results in Brief

We estimate the four clinics denied outpatient care to less than 1.4 percent of the applicants during fiscal year 1988. These applicants were denied care because either they were not eligible to receive care at VA clinics or the services needed were not available. Based on a review of available records at the clinics visited, veterans seldom complained to clinic officials that they were denied outpatient care. Also, officials of veterans' service organizations said that they were not aware of eligible veterans being inappropriately denied care at the clinics we visited.

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## Background

VA operates the largest health care delivery system in the United States, including 235 outpatient clinics within 27 medical districts. VA clinics received about 2.2 million applications for outpatient medical care during fiscal year 1988. Health care is offered in over 70 different medical specialty areas, including radiation therapy, allergy immunology, optometry, and alcohol and drug dependence treatment.

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Each eligible veteran who applies for medical care at a VA clinic is examined by a VA physician to determine whether the veteran has a condition that needs medical treatment. If treatment is needed, either it is provided on the day the veteran applies or an appointment is scheduled for a later time.

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## Scope and Methodology

VA operated 14 clinics in Florida which received 154,000 applications for outpatient care in fiscal year 1988. To determine how many veterans were denied care and why care was denied, we visited four clinics, including two of the busiest in the state. Two clinics were in VA medical centers in Miami and Tampa; the other two, located in Oakland Park and Orlando, were satellites of the Miami and Tampa medical centers, respectively.

The four clinics received 66,365 applications for outpatient care in fiscal year 1988. From this universe, we reviewed applicants' records from two samples to determine the (1) number of veterans denied care and (2) reasons for the denials. First, we randomly selected 400 applicants (100 at each clinic) from a universe of the 66,294 applicants the clinics reported as having received care. Second, we requested the records for all 71 applicants that the clinics classified as denials (applicant was not eligible for care or service was not available). We reviewed the records of 36 of the 71 denials; clinic officials could not locate the records of the other 35. We did not assess the adequacy of VA's medical judgments concerning the need for medical care. However, we discussed the applicant's case with VA physicians or clinic personnel to determine the reason for the denial. We did not contact the applicants. Appendixes I, II, and III provide general information on the results of our records review.

We used the results of our records review to estimate the percentage of applicants denied outpatient care at the four clinics. Because our estimate is based on a sample, there is a sampling error associated with it. Thus, the actual percentage of applicants denied care might be somewhat greater or less than our sample results would indicate. There is no more than a 5-percent chance, however, that the actual percentage is greater than the estimate presented in this report.

To determine whether veterans were complaining about being denied outpatient care at the four clinics, we reviewed available correspondence files. We also interviewed officials of veterans' service organizations to obtain their views on this matter. These organizations were the

Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, and Paralyzed Veterans Association. In addition, we interviewed the director of the Florida Division of Veterans' Affairs, a state agency that administers veterans' programs. We conducted our review from July to December 1988 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

## Few Veterans Denied Care

We estimate that less than 1.4 percent of the applicants for outpatient care were denied care by the four clinics we visited. This estimate is based on a total of 27 applicants who, we found, had been denied care. In our sample of 400 records,<sup>1</sup> we found 2 denials. Also, our review of the 36 applicants that the clinics classified as denials showed that 25 had been denied care and 11 had been provided care (see app. I). Because of the small number of denials in our samples, we (1) determined the upper bound of our estimated percentage of denials in the universe and (2) did not attempt to project the numbers of applicants denied care for specific reasons.

Applicants were denied care because (1) they were not eligible for care (other than emergency treatment) or (2) the services needed were not available. The following sections provide some examples of these cases.

## Applicants Not Eligible for Care

To receive medical care at VA, an applicant must meet eligibility requirements, such as (1) service on active duty in the military for a minimum period of time—24 months for a person entering military service after September 7, 1980—and (2) discharge from military service under conditions other than dishonorable. Some applicants at the four clinics were not eligible to receive care because they did not meet these requirements, as the following examples illustrate.

- An applicant was brought to VA by ambulance, suffering from alcohol intoxication with seizures. Because the applicant had not served on active duty in the military service, he was transferred to the county hospital after his condition was stabilized.
- An applicant complained of rectal bleeding. This applicant entered military service after September 7, 1980, and had not served on active duty

<sup>1</sup>Records for 4 of the 400 applicants sampled did not contain sufficient information to determine whether the veterans were denied care; records for 8 other applicants showed that the applicants left the clinic before a VA physician evaluated their medical condition. As a result, our estimate is based on a review of 388 records.

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for the required 24 months. The applicant was denied care because he was not eligible and his condition did not require emergency care.

All eligible veterans may receive pre- or post-hospital care at VA clinics, as well as care for conditions that, left untreated, would immediately result in the need for hospital admission. In addition, some medical conditions, such as dental problems, may be treated if they are related to an injury or disease that VA determined was incurred or aggravated during active duty (service-connected disability). Some veterans who applied for dental care were denied care because it was not needed for a condition related to a service-connected disability.

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### Services Needed Not Available

Although the VA health care system provides care in 70 different medical specialties, not every specialty is available at each clinic. For example, one of the four clinics visited did not operate a drug rehabilitation program. As a result, a veteran who applied for treatment of his drug dependency was denied care. He was, however, given instructions on how to enroll in a drug rehabilitation program at one of the three closest VA medical centers that offered such a program.

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### Veterans Seldom Complained About Being Denied Care

Only 13 veterans wrote to clinic officials about being denied outpatient care during fiscal year 1988. Most of these veterans were denied dental care by the four clinics because VA determined that the care was not related to a service-connected disability.

According to officials of the four veterans' service organizations we contacted, they were not aware of veterans being inappropriately denied care at the four clinics. Some officials believe that veterans who apply for care and are denied are misinformed about their eligibility for care. In addition, the director of the Florida Division of Veterans' Affairs told us his investigations had not identified any eligible veterans who were inappropriately denied medical care.

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### Agency Comments

VA reviewed a copy of the draft report and had no comments (see app. IV).

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We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and other interested parties. Copies also will be made available to others on request.

This report was prepared under the direction of David P. Baine, Director of Federal Health Care Delivery Issues. Other major contributors are listed in appendix V.

*Edward A. Hensmore*

*for*

Lawrence H. Thompson  
Assistant Comptroller General

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Table II.1: Characteristics of Medical Services Received (Fiscal Year 1988)	

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**Abbreviations**

GAO      General Accounting Office  
VA        Department of Veterans Affairs

# Results of GAO Review of Outpatient Applications (Fiscal Year 1988)

	Miami	Tampa	Oakland Park	Orlando
<b>Total applications for outpatient care</b>	<b>21,055</b>	<b>26,476</b>	<b>6,602</b>	<b>12,232</b>
<b>Applications reviewed:</b>				
GAO random sample:	100	100	100	100
Applicants denied care	0	1	0	1
Applicants for whom unable to determine whether care denied <sup>a</sup>	5	1	6	0
Applicants who received service	95	98	94	99
Applications clinics classified as denials:	25	31	b	15
Applicants denied care	11	5	b	9
Applicants' records missing	11	20	b	4
Applicants received care — misclassified by clinics	3	6	b	2

<sup>a</sup>Applicants left before being examined or medical information missing.

<sup>b</sup>Oakland Park data are included with Miami.

# Characteristics of Medical Services Received by Applicants in GAO Sample

GAO reviewed the medical records of 386 applicants who were served at the four VA clinics during fiscal year 1988. VA physicians had examined the applicants to determine their need for medical services. Based on a medical examination, the physician had (1) determined that the applicant's condition did not require medical services, (2) provided medical services but did not order further follow-up care, or (3) provided medical services and ordered follow-up care. The following examples illustrate this:

- A veteran requested a specific medication for relief of chronic hiccups. The examining physician determined that the veteran's condition did not warrant the medication.
- A VA physician diagnosed a veteran as having an intestinal virus. The veteran was given medication and advised to return if his symptoms lasted more than 48 hours.
- A veteran with a probable kidney stone received a urinalysis, an X-ray of his urinary tract, and a prescription on the day he applied for care. A follow-up visit to the urology clinic was scheduled for 3 days later.

Table II.1 shows the results of our review of the applicants' medical records for those who received services as described above.

**Table II.1: Characteristics of Medical Services Received (Fiscal Year 1988)**

	Miami	Tampa	Oakland Park	Orlando
Examined but no care required	6	5	5	3
Examined and services provided but no follow-up care	39	32	20	22
Examined and services provided and follow-up care ordered	50	61	69	74

# Characteristics of Applicants in GAO Sample

	Miami	Tampa	Oakland Park	Orlando
Veterans' eligibility category for medical care: <sup>a</sup>				
Category A	95	96	95	98
Category B	1	2	4	0
Category C	3	2	1	2
Active duty	1	0	0	0
Veterans with service-connected disabilities	23	51	62	66
Veterans without service-connected disabilities	76	49	38	34
Number of follow-up appointments <sup>b</sup>	52	62	73	74
Average number of days to appointment <sup>b</sup>	16.2	21.8	39.3	16.8
Average age of applicants (years)	48.1	53.1	57.6	54.3
Range of applicants' ages (years)	20-101	21-81	23-82	24-76

<sup>a</sup>Category A includes veterans who have (1) service-connected disabilities, (2) special status (such as former prisoners of war or World War I veterans), or (3) incomes below a specified level. Veterans not in category A can be eligible for care as category B or C based on income. Category B includes veterans with incomes greater than the category A threshold but less than a specified level, and category C includes veterans with incomes greater than the category B threshold.

<sup>b</sup>Some veterans had more than one appointment.

# Comments From the Department of Veterans Affairs

Office of the  
Administrator  
of Veterans Affairs

Washington DC 20420



APR 25 1989

Mr. Lawrence H. Thompson  
Assistant Comptroller General  
Human Resources Division  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Thompson:

This responds to your request that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) review and comment on the General Accounting Office (GAO) March 27, 1989, draft report VA HEALTH CARE: Few Veterans Denied Care at Florida Clinics. Because of congressional concern that VA clinics might be denying care to large numbers of veterans who apply for outpatient medical care in high-demand areas, GAO reviewed a random sample of applications for outpatient care at four VA clinics in Florida during Fiscal Year 1988. GAO estimates that care was denied to less than 1.4 percent of applicants at those four clinics. Care was denied because the applicants were either not eligible to receive care or the services needed were not available.

We are pleased with your positive findings. Because there are no recommendations in the report, we have no additional comments.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Edward J. Berwinski".

Edward J. Berwinski  
Secretary

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# Major Contributors to This Report

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