

# Office of Public Health “Atomic Veteran” Related Programs

Presentation to the Veterans Advisory Board on Dose Reconstruction  
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# Contents

- Organization and Responsibilities
- Outreach efforts
- Medical opinion process
- Future activities
- Questions

## VA's Administrations

**The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is one of the three major administrations of the Department of Veterans Affairs.**

Veterans  
Health  
Administration  
(VHA)

National  
Cemetery  
Administration  
(NCA)

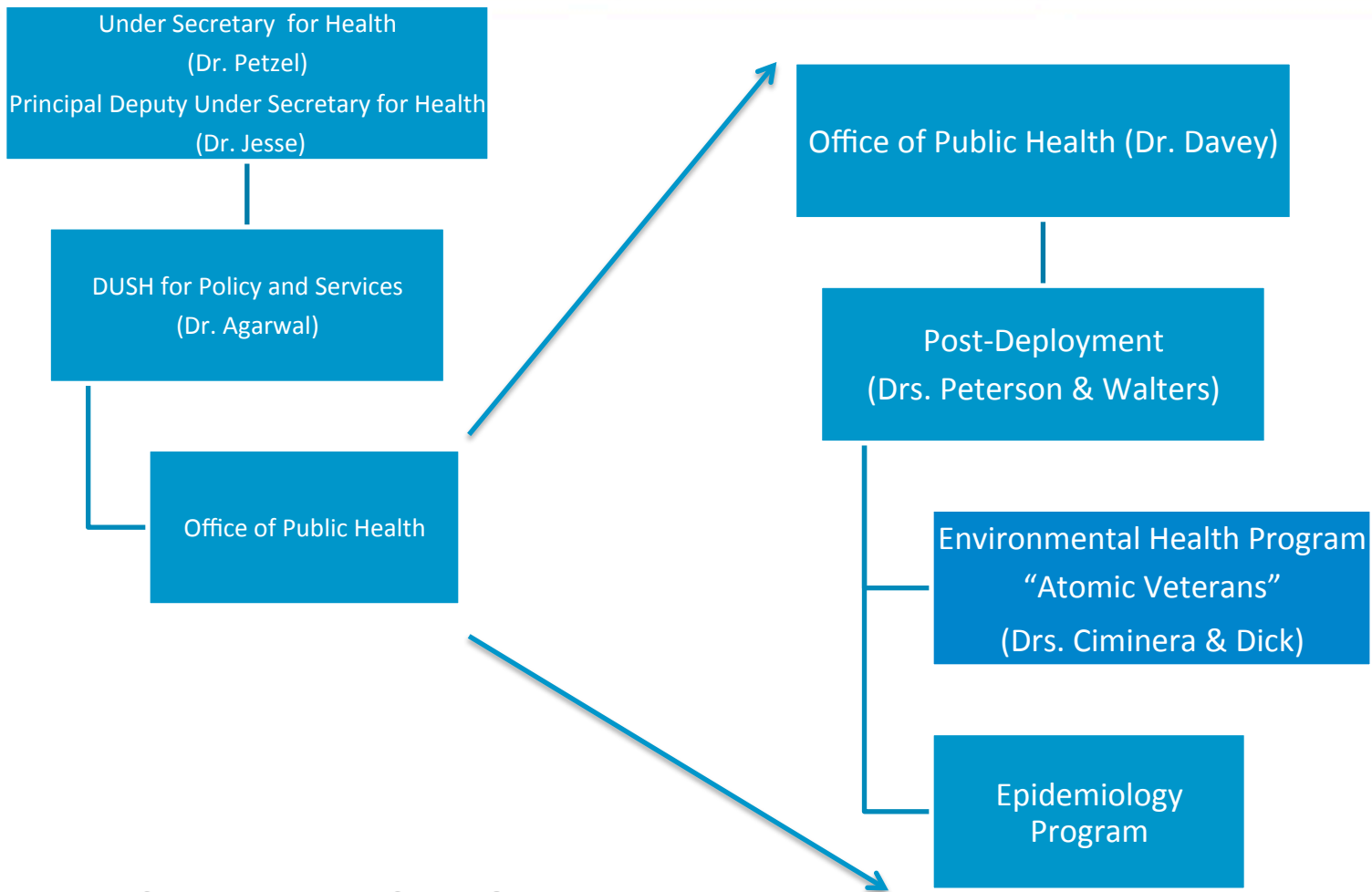
Veterans  
Benefits  
Administration  
(VBA)

## Enhancing the Way We Provide Care

**“Patients are in control of their health care, and the system is designed around the needs of the patient.”**

-Robert A. Petzel, M.D.  
Under Secretary for Health  
Department of Veterans Affairs

# Where we fit in the Veterans Health Administration



## Office of Public Health (OPH) – Responsibilities Related to “Atomic Veterans”

- Epidemiologic Research
- VA/VHA Policy
- Ionizing Radiation Registry (IRR) program
- Outreach
- Medical opinions
- Subject matter support to Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), media, Congress and other stakeholders

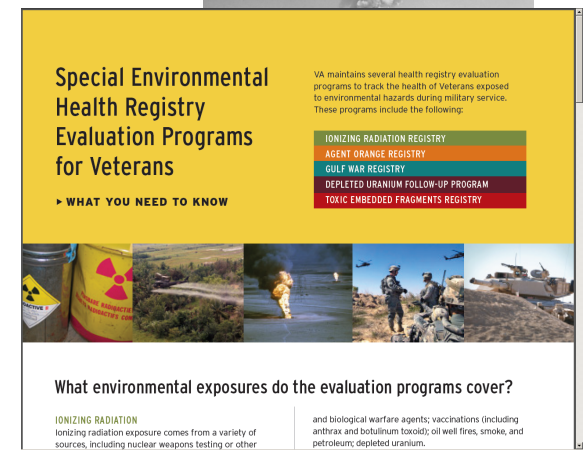
# Outreach – What we have (Brochures)

## “Are you an Atomic Veteran?” Brochure

Provides information about eligibility for VA compensation and medical care, dose reconstruction, medical claim determination, Ionizing Radiation Registry Program, and more

## “Special Environmental Health Registry Evaluation Programs for Veterans” Brochure

Provides an overview of five VA health registry programs that track the health of Veterans exposed to environmental hazards during military service: Ionizing Radiation, Agent Orange, Gulf War, Depleted Uranium, and Toxic Embedded Fragments

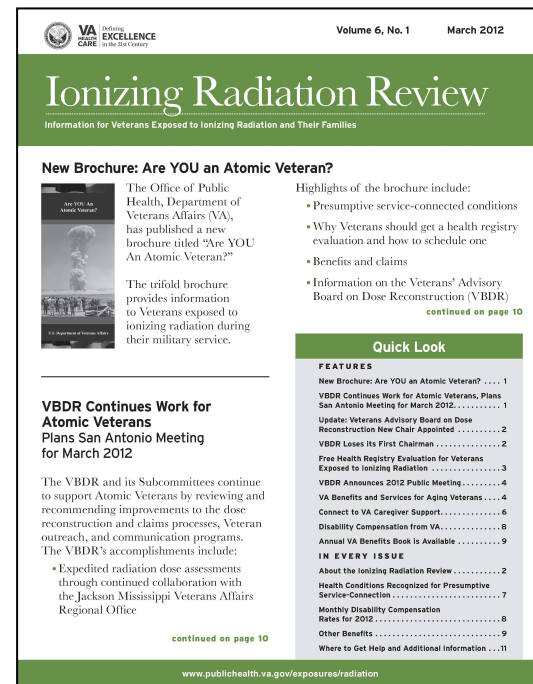


# Outreach – What we have (Newsletters)

## Ionizing Radiation Review

- “Information for Veterans Exposed to Ionizing Radiation and their Families”
- Produced with contributions from the Veterans’ Advisory Board on Dose Reconstruction (VBDR)
- Includes health conditions (recognized Presumptive diseases) related to ionizing radiation exposure
- Information on the free health registry
- Compensation rates
- Special focus articles
- Where to get additional information

VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION





# Outreach- What we have (Website)

## Post Deployment Health Website

- For Veterans who may have been exposed to a range of chemical, physical, and environmental hazards during military service.
- Newly revamped for easier use by Veterans, Providers, Families, and other Stakeholders
- More updates planned to improve navigation
- Includes diseases and associated conditions that may affect Veterans.
- Provides up to date information on topics of potential concern to Veterans

The screenshot shows the VA Public Health website. The header includes the United States Department of Veterans Affairs logo and navigation links: Home, Veteran Services, Business, About VA, Media Room, Locations, Contact Us, and Public Health. The main content area is titled 'Public Health' and features a 'Military Exposures' section. This section includes a sub-header 'Military Exposures' with a description: 'Veterans may have been exposed to a range of chemical, physical, and environmental hazards during military service.' Below this is a featured article titled 'Camp Lejeune Water Supplies' with a 'Learn More' link. A grid of 12 exposure topics is displayed, each with a small image and text: Agent Orange, Burn Pits, OEF/OIF/OND Exposures, Radiation, Fuels (Petroleum, Oils and Lubricants), Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses, Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Iraq Freedom and New Dawn; related illnesses, Rabies, Depleted Uranium, Toxic Embedded Fragments, and Occupational & Environmental Exposures. On the right side, there are sections for 'Connect with Us Veterans Health' (with social media icons), 'Subscribe Exposures Updates' (with an email input field and 'Sign Up' button), and 'Contact VA' (with contact information for Environmental Health Coordinators Directory, Health Care, Benefits, and TDD).

[www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures)

# Outreach - Understanding Veterans' needs

## Reader Survey for Newsletters

- A first-time survey recently approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)
- Designed to improve the delivery of newsletters through Veteran feedback
- Essential to determine the best format to provide information to serve the needs of Veterans and best use government resources in today's changing technology (social media, internet, email)



## "HAIG" Survey of VHA's Environmental Registry Program

- Clinicians and coordinators at each Medical Center to see Veterans with environmental concerns
- First ever survey to gather baseline information
- Understand the organizational structure, staffing, and performance
- Identify and streamline processes, procedures, and services available to system wide for Veterans with Environmental Exposure concerns



# Outreach- Potential Approach

## Initial outreach

- For Veterans not in the registry
- Advertise programs (does not require frequent updates)

## Targeted updates

- For Veterans in the registries and other focused groups
- Post-Deployment Health Newsletter covering a variety of health concerns
- More timely than current Newsletters
- Frequent updates

## Feedback greatly appreciated



Depleted Uranium (DU) Fact Sheet <sup>5/13/09</sup>

Information for veterans, their families and others about depleted uranium

### Veterans Involved

- Gulf War veterans exposed to depleted uranium (DU) through friendly fire.
- Others potentially exposed to DU, including Bosnia, Gulf War, and OIF/OEF veterans.

### What Is Depleted Uranium?

DU is a byproduct of the uranium enrichment process that makes nuclear fuel. DU has approximately 60 percent of the radioactivity and the same chemical toxicity as natural uranium, which is present in small amounts in our environment and to which we are all exposed through our food and water. In the early 1960s, the U.S. began testing DU for projectile use because of its ability to penetrate armor made with less dense metals. For more information visit the DU library at <http://hfp.osd.mil/du/>.

### When Is Depleted Uranium Hazardous?

DU is a chemical and radiation health hazard primarily if internalized, such as through embedded fragments, contaminated wounds, and inhalation or ingestion. When a projectile made with DU penetrates a vehicle, small pieces of DU are created that can scatter and become embedded in muscle and soft tissue. In addition to DU wounds, soldiers exposed to DU in struck vehicles may inhale or swallow small airborne DU

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al exposure is related to the amount of DU in a vehicle with DU weapons or DU shielding units of DU or external radiation. For more <http://hfp.osd.mil/du/healthEffects.jsp>. <http://hfp.osd.mil/du/faqs.jsp>.

in has been established at the Baltimore VA DU exposure and to provide recommendations if embedded fragments. The program for fragments involves detailed physical exams

vetterans concerned about DU exposure tionnaire and a mail-in, 24-hour urine test for

# Medical Opinions – Process

## **Presumptive illness claims adjudicated at VBA Jackson Regional Office (JRO)**

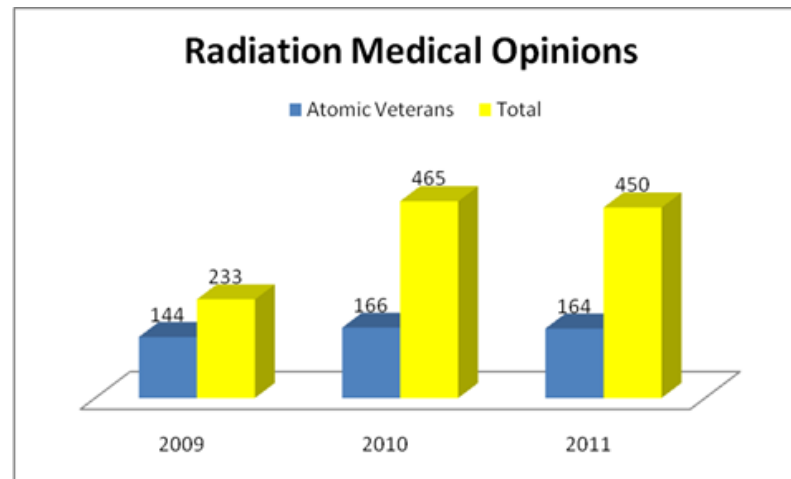
- 38 CFR 3.309 (d) (2)
- 21 cancers listed are presumed to have been caused by radiation exposure
- Presumptive claims approved if part of a “radiation risk activity” population

## **Non-presumptive illness claims forwarded to VBA Central Office for development and medical opinion by VHA, Office of Public Health**

- 38 CFR 3.311
- The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Interactive Radio Epidemiological Program (IREP) is used to determine probability of causation (PC) for diseases in the database (cancers)
- If IREP calculates 50% or greater PC, the claim will receive a favorable opinion
- For claims not in IREP, other epidemiological evidence is used to support the opinion
- Occupational, medical, and other radiation related claims are handled separately

## Medical Opinions – Performance

- A backlog of approximately 100 claims existed from 2008 to 2010 due to staff vacancies at OPH
- OPH now adequately staffed
- Average non-presumptive claim processing time in OPH is 4 days
- 1160 claims processed from 2009 through 2011
  - 486 (42%) of claims were from Atomic Veterans, 58% Occupational claims
  - 74 favorable opinions (6%): mostly skin cancer and Posterior Subcapsular Cataract (PSC)



## Medical Opinions – Recent Cases

- 75 total opinions thus far in 2012 (as of 15 Mar)
- 22 (29%) of claims were from Atomic Veterans
- 5 cases received favorable opinions for skin cancers
  - all had maximum estimated total dose to the skin of 550 rem
  - Defense Threat Reduction Agency expedited dose processing methodology
- 1 case received favorable opinion for Posterior Subcapsular Cataract
  - maximum estimated total dose to the lens of the eye of 28 rem
  - Defense Threat Reduction Agency expedited dose processing methodology

## Future Activities - Prevention

### Focus on prevention:

Reduce Veteran's chance of disease through modifiable risk factors like smoking and exercise.



### Help prevent heart disease

**Here's how:** Exercise 30 minutes a day; cut down on saturated fats (cheese, butter, cream, processed meats, bacon); add fruits and vegetables; eat fatty fish such as salmon and tuna twice a week; and limit salt. Go to [www.prevention.va.gov](http://www.prevention.va.gov) to learn more about healthy living.

## Provider Education - What we have

### **Ionizing Radiation Registry (IRR) Program Procedures Handbook**

Details clinical and administrative policies related to the maintenance of the VHA Ionizing Radiation Registry (IRR) program of physical examinations for eligible, concerned veterans

Available to inform health care teams and community stakeholders



# Provider Education – New Developments

## VA Environmental Exposure Pocket Card

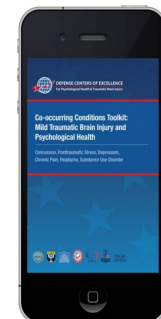
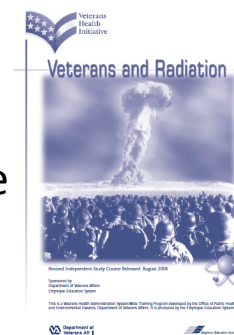
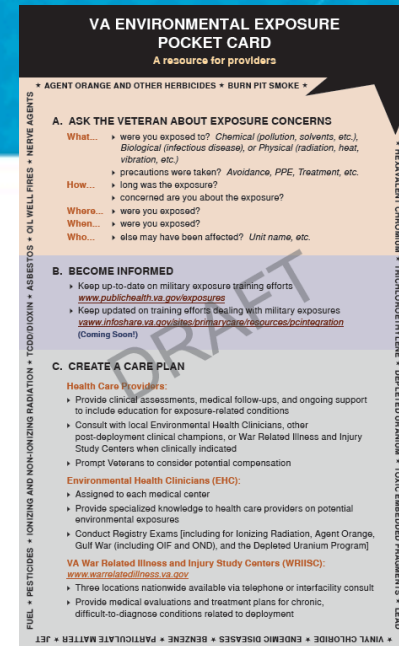
Information on resources for primary care teams to assist Veterans who have environmental health concerns stemming from military service

## Partnering with Primary Care Services

Highlight educational products for the Post-Deployment care of Veterans

## “Environmental Exposure App” for care teams

- Will Provide “just-in-time” information to providers, patient care teams, and patients
- Contents include: taking an exposure history, the history of exposures during military service, potential and known health effects, preventive measures, and treatment



## Future Activities – Performance Improvement

- Analyze HAIG survey data to inform next revision of the Environmental Registries handbook
- Obtain feedback on outreach and education from Veteran's and Veteran's Service Organizations (VSOs)
- Work with VBDR to document OPH processes to identify areas of potential improvement
- Collect scientific reviews that supported medical opinions and post where they can be accessed by providers and compensation examiners



QUESTIONS?