

## **The VA Committees: Mission Accomplished!**

*By James Edwards, DC*

One of the highlights of my professional career was serving as ACA chairman on Jan. 23, 2001, when President George W. Bush signed HR 3447 into law.<sup>1</sup> It was an historic victory for the chiropractic profession and for our nation's veterans. In fact, the signing of this bill completed the goal set by Dr. B. J. Palmer, who was responsible for the introduction of the first VA bill 65 years prior.

While this legislative victory was exciting, the ACA knew proper implementation of chiropractic into the VA health care system would be the ultimate yardstick for judging success. The ACA also knew that responsibility for success fell squarely on the shoulders of the mainstream doctors of chiropractic appointed to the first VA Chiropractic Advisory Committee: Drs. Reed Phillips, Cynthia Vaughn and Rick McMichael. After one full year of work, I reported on the tremendous efforts and successes of those doctors.<sup>2</sup>

While the WCA and ICA publicly chastised those three doctors for not supporting pure "direct access" and repeatedly alleged that veterans would not be able to access chiropractic care, it turns out both organizations were just dead wrong! Today, in addition to veterans receiving care at individual chiropractic clinics on a fee basis, veterans are being treated on-site at 30 VA facilities across the country.

But absolute proof that veterans are able to access chiropractic care freely came during a recent three-hour conference call meeting with 22 of the VA on-site providers. That meeting revealed that the on-site chiropractic doctors have true waiting-list practices, with an average new-patient wait time of two to four weeks. One VA chiropractic on-site provider reported that their next new-patient appointment time was July 2006! More importantly, not a single VA on-site provider reported a single incident of a veteran wanting chiropractic care and not being able to receive it. So much for the shrill, politically motivated and unfounded accusations of the WCA and ICA!

The first VA advisory committee sunsetted on Dec. 31, 2004; the second VA Chiropractic Advisory Committee (on implementation) sunsetted on Dec. 31, 2005. Fortunately, a charter for the formation of the new VHA Chiropractic Field Advisory Committee (FAC) for the Chiropractic Care Program has been signed. The new FAC takes effect on Jan. 1, 2006 and is comprised of actual VA on-site doctors of chiropractic. Their responsibility is to assume oversight of chiropractic care as a service within the VHA, and make recommendations as appropriate.

With the sunsetting of both committees, the chiropractic profession owes several individuals a vote of thanks. In addition to Drs. Phillips, Vaughn and McMichael, and VA Secretaries Principi and Nicholson, three other individuals must be singled out for their outstanding efforts.

First, veterans advocate Michael O'Rourke, PA, who served on both VA committees. Mr. O'Rourke turned out to be an excellent resource for the other members and was an invaluable asset to the overall project. It was clear from the outset that Mr. O'Rourke was truly committed to the veterans he serves; he worked hard to ensure they would receive the chiropractic care they needed.

Second, VA Committee Manager Sara McVicker, RN, who oversaw and lent both technical and administrative support to both VA committees. Her commitment to the success of the project and willingness to do whatever it took to get the job done was one of the main reasons the committees were successful. Fortunately for veterans, Ms. McVicker has been given the responsibility to serve as committee manager for the new FAC.

And finally, Charles DuVall Jr., DC, who also served on both VA committees. That's right, Chuck DuVall of NACM fame! While Dr. DuVall's committee appointment was opposed initially by both the ACA and *Dynamic Chiropractic*,<sup>3</sup> my private conversations with him totally convinced me that he was much more interested in veterans than his own agenda or the agenda of his organization. As a result of those conversations, a "gentleman's agreement" was reached in that I would work to stop opposition to his appointment if Dr. DuVall would not do any media interviews while a member of the VA committee. While colleagues warned me that Dr. DuVall could not be trusted and would not keep the agreement, he did. More importantly, I want you to know that during the three-year advisory process, Dr. DuVall represented mainstream chiropractic admirably and voted with the majority each and every time.

Before closing the book on the historic work of the two VA committees, there is one other noteworthy accomplishment that needs to be mentioned. In addition to helping veterans access the care they want and need, the new VA model also will have a tremendous positive effect for the chiropractic profession and the other patients we serve. That additional benefit will occur because the committees were successful in creating a new **full-scope** federal model that I believe will eventually replace the limited Medicare federal model we have today. In time, I also believe state legislatures across the country will use the VA model as the template for chiropractic coverage and reimbursement at the state level.

*Author's note:* The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions, policies or positions of the American Chiropractic Association.

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