Ensuring Access to High-Quality Care for Veterans:
Advanced Practice Registered Nurses Can Help Answer the Call

Our nation’s veterans deserve the highest quality of care delivered in a timely manner. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which operates more than 1,700 sites and provides care to 8.76 million veterans annually, relies on the expertise of all healthcare providers to ensure the wellness of our nation’s service men and women. Within the VA, Registered Nurses (RNs) and Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs), including nurse practitioners (NPs), certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs), and clinical nurse specialists (CNSs), are essential members of the VHA healthcare teams. In fact, nearly 56,000 RNs, NPs, CRNAs, and CNSs are currently employed by the VA.

As our nation’s veterans age, and as troops returning from active duty overseas come home, the need for safe, reliable, and cost-effective care continues to grow. Between FY 2002 and FY 2013 alone, the number of enrollees utilizing VHA services rose from 6.8 million to 8.9 million. Recently, Congress called upon the VA to address how best to meet the demand for a greater number of providers, and legislative proposals have been developed to increase the number of nurses, physicians, and other healthcare professionals.

Another viable solution to address this demand is allowing APRNs to practice to the full scope of their education and training in VHA facilities so that these VA health providers are utilized to their fullest potential.

APRNs: Committed to Serving Those Who Have Served

Numerous studies and extensive empirical evidence show that the care provided by APRNs is high quality and can help alleviate provider shortages. National entities such as the Federal Trade Commission, the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the National Governors Association, and other policy bodies have noted the high quality of care APRNs provide, and the positive impact it has in ensuring access to essential services. Policies that require unnecessary and burdensome oversight of APRNs present barriers that potentially delay the diagnosis and treatment of illness. APRNs receive extensive education and clinical training in their specific field of practice. They are required to pass rigorous national certification board exams to demonstrate their expertise, knowledge, and competency.

Many APRN students also receive clinical training in VHA facilities where they become acclimated to the VHA system and its patients. Additionally, the nursing profession takes an active lead in preparing its students to care for veteran populations. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) is a proud partner of the VA’s Joining Forces initiative, and 660 schools of nursing have pledged to enrich nursing education to ensure that future
RNs and APRNs are trained in the best practices associated with caring for military service members, veterans, and their families. This illustrates nursing’s commitment to raising the quality of care available to our nation’s military personnel by priming future generations of nurses.

Maximize APRNs’ Ability to Provide Care in the VHA by Granting Them Full Practice Authority

Given the benefits APRNs bring to the VHA healthcare system, and understanding the growing demand for clinicians, the VHA is proposing to recognize APRNs as full practice providers within VHA facilities. More specifically, under this proposal, APRNs would be allowed to practice to the degree that they were educated and trained. This would also enhance APRNs’ role as members of the healthcare team. The VHA’s recommendation directly aligns with the IOM’s landmark report The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health which calls for the removal of barriers that prevent APRNs from practicing to their full scope, and states that nurses should be full partners with physicians and other health professionals to improve and redesign healthcare in the United States. Additionally, the VHA’s proposal would promote parity around the care our nation’s service men and women receive. The recommendation parallels current policies for APRN full practice authority in the Department of Defense and the Indian Health Service. When deployed, America’s military receive care from APRNs who are able to practice to their full authority. That same practice should continue when they return home as veterans. The VHA’s recommendation aims to maximize the full range of evidence-based services APRNs provide, as well as ensure access to care in a safe and effective patient-centered model.

Moreover, permitting full practice authority within the VHA could help recruit and retain a greater number of APRNs to care for veterans. As APRN students near graduation, many opt for employment in environments that uphold their professional standards as full practice providers. We respectfully request that you urge VA Acting Secretary Sloan Gibson to move forward with the approval process to allow APRNs full practice authority within the VHA.

Supporters of Allowing APRNs Full Practice Authority in VHA Facilities

AARP

51 national nursing organizations representing the Nursing Community Coalition

28 Members of Congress

1 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Health Administration. Accessed from: http://www.va.gov/health/
advancing-health.aspx
for-best-practices/center-publications/nace-health-publications/cd2-content/main-content-list/the-role-of-nurse-practitioners.html
10 Letter addressed to American Association of Colleges of Nursing from U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health Robert Jesse, MD, PhD. (May 16, 2014).

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July 30, 2014