



The surgery represents a milestone in the field of organ transplantation and provides veterans with end-stage liver disease state-of-the-art care.

DeBakey VA Performs First Liver Transplant

HOUSTON – A 63 year-old, U.S. Navy veteran from Webster, Tx. became the first patient to undergo orthotopic liver transplantation at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC).

The surgery, which took place on November 30, 2007, represents a milestone locally in the field of organ transplantation and provides veterans with end-stage liver disease state-of-the-art care.

“The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center’s program for the treatment of liver disease is among the most advanced in the country. Given that we provide excellent care for veterans with end-stage liver disease preoperatively and postoperatively, the ability to now meet their transplantation surgical needs is a tremendous advantage,” said David H. Berger, M.D., MEDVAMC Operative Care Line executive.

Partnering with John A. Goss, M.D., chief, Division of Abdominal Transplantation at Baylor College of

Medicine, the goal of the MEDVAMC Liver Transplant Center is to provide the highest level of care to the veteran population.

The multidisciplinary Liver Transplant Team at the MEDVAMC includes Berger; Goss; Christine O’Mahony, M.D., transplant surgeon; Khozema Hussain, M.D., liver transplant director; Donna Jackson, R.N.-C., liver transplant clinical coordinator; and Risë Stribling, M.D., transplant hepatologist.

The surgery on Michael Abshire, who suffers from end-stage liver disease, was performed by the MEDVAMC Liver Transplant Team. After the three hour operation and six days in MEDVAMC’s Surgical Intensive Care Unit, Abshire’s new liver is functioning perfectly well, Berger said.

A Vietnam veteran who served aboard the U.S.S. Bon Homme Richard, Abshire said he and his family are most grateful for the outstanding care he received at MEDVAMC and for the availability of the donor organ that saved his life.



Liver transplant patient Michael Abshire, a 63 year-old, U.S. Navy veteran from Webster, Tx. poses with (from left) MEDVAMC Operative Care Line Executive David H. Berger, M.D.; Division Chief of Abdominal Transplantation at Baylor College of Medicine John A. Goss, M.D.; VA National Director of Surgery Ralph G. Depalma, M.D.; and Liver Transplant Clinical Coordinator Donna Jackson, R.N.-C.

“I am alive today because of this hospital, because of these wonderful doctors and nurses and everyone else involved in the transplant program, and most importantly, because of the gift of life that was bestowed to me from an

organ donor and their family. I feel incredibly blessed,” said Abshire.

“Two main reasons the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center was

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Extraordinary Local Veteran on Cheerios® Box

HOUSTON – U.S. Army veteran, David Fowler, from Katy, Tx., is one of 12 gold medal winners from last year’s National Veterans Wheelchair Games who will be featured on Cheerios® boxes as a result of an agreement between the Department of Veterans Affairs’ Veterans Canteen Service and General Mills Corporation. The action photographs of these athletes will appear on the back and side panels of cereal boxes released in March 2008.

Fowler, who receives his medical care at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC), won gold medals in power soccer, power slalom, Power 200, and Power Chair Relay at the 2007 Games held in Milwaukee. This event is the largest annual wheelchair sports competition in the world and is

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Houston VA Performs Complex Surgery for Intractable Epilepsy

HOUSTON – An estimated two million Americans of all ages have epilepsy. Most are successfully treated with medications, but more than 30 percent of epileptic patients are termed drug-resistant, experiencing frequent, sometimes disabling seizures. Surgical procedures being offered at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) offer veterans suffering from this lifelong problem the hope of freedom from seizures.

One of those leading the efforts in the MEDVAMC’s Comprehensive Epilepsy Program is Bruce Ehni, M.D., Neurosurgery Section chief. “For some patients, surgery to remove the part of the brain where seizures originate may be the best treatment option and offers a potential cure. The success of epilepsy surgery depends on the accuracy with which we can locate the seizure-generating areas and careful testing to ensure that surgical removal of this area does not affect critical brain functions such as language, memory, or motor abilities,” said Ehni.

In the past, patients usually tried several medications with poor results for

many years, even decades, before being considered for surgery. But more recently, surgery is considered sooner because studies have shown the earlier surgery is performed, the better the psychosocial and functional outcome.

“Epilepsy treatment has evolved to include consideration of the patient’s quality of life, not just the number of seizures. Both continued seizures and high doses of medication impose costs on all areas of a person’s life — intellectual, psychological, social, educational, and employment,” said David Chen, M.D., Neurophysiology Laboratory director.

At the MEDVAMC, state-of-the-art technology is applied to perform the safest and least-invasive procedure to help a patient achieve the highest possible quality of life. Epilepsy surgery candidates undergo extensive evaluations including advanced imaging techniques, neuropsychologic evaluations, extracranial video-EEG monitoring, and if necessary, intracranial grid electrode by MEDVAMC’s team of neurologists and

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VA SUICIDE PREVENTION HOTLINE

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OPEN 24 HRS, 7 DAYS A WEEK

First Liver Transplant

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selected to become a Liver Transplant Center are our award-winning surgery program and our strong ties with other member hospitals of the Texas Medical Center," said Edgar L. Tucker, MEDVAMC director. "I would particularly like to point out the contributions of St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital. The management and staff there encouraged and supported our Liver Transplant Team to observe their surgical procedures and intensive care unit processes, shadow their transplant experts, and learn every aspect about their remarkably successful transplant program."

Goss said Abshire will now receive the standard post-transplant care regimen, including serial monitoring of liver function and immunosuppressive medication levels. He will require life-long follow-up at MEDVAMC's Liver Transplant Center for routine diagnostic follow-up.

The MEDVAMC received official designation as a Liver Transplant Center

from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the United Network for Organ Sharing. It joins Portland, Oregon; Nashville, Tennessee; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Richmond, Virginia VA Medical Centers offering liver transplantation to veterans as standard of care for end-stage liver disease.

The VA National Transplant Program began providing solid organ transplants to veteran patients in 1961. Thomas E. Starzl, M.D. performed the VA's first kidney transplant at the VA Medical Center in Denver.

Since then, the VA National Transplant Program has expanded services to provide veteran patients with heart transplant services in 1980, bone marrow in 1982, liver in 1989, and lung in 1991. Most transplants are performed in-house in specific VA medical centers across the country. VA also utilizes several VA sharing agreements with university affiliates and local emergency contracts for critical cases.

In 1995, a national VA transplant office was established in Washington, D.C. to ensure all veterans received equal



A little over a month after surgery, U.S. Navy veteran Michael Abshire, the first liver transplant patient at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, gives the thumbs up along with his Operating Room nurses (from left) Grace Campos, R.N., Deborah Larocca, R.N., and Nida Q. Papa, R.N.

access to transplant services and establish a central referral center. A computerized database was developed and currently, there are more than 12,000 transplant records maintained in the national VA transplant database dating back to 1995. The VA National Transplant Program office receives approximately 1,200 referrals per year and about 350

transplants are performed annually.

Liver transplant candidates must undergo detailed physical, laboratory, and psychological evaluations to ensure proper selection and therapy. Tests are done to confirm the diagnosis of end-stage liver disease, to rule out other potential treatments, and to assess the candidate's ability to tolerate surgery. ♦

A Word from the Director . . .

Thank You, Dr. Horvath!

HOUSTON - At the end of March, Thomas B. Horvath, M.D., F.R.A.C.P. will retire as the chief of staff of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. During his tenure, he has established himself as an effective leader, clinician, teacher, and champion for our nation's veterans.

Throughout his 33 years of federal service, Dr. Horvath has demonstrated a passion for excellence and an unwavering commitment to the fundamental mission of the VA, "to care for him who shall have borne the battle." He has left a mark at the national level in the breadth and depth of mental health services currently provided to veterans.

His personal commitment to clinical excellence supported by research and education was manifested by his collateral responsibility as Science and Education Advisor for Mental Health to VA Central Office. In this position, he directed the growing system of Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Centers (MIRECCs) that he initiated 10 years ago.

There are now 11 MIRECCs around the country, with an annual core funding of \$22 million. The center leverage this to almost \$100 million in external competitive grants with hundreds of peer-reviewed publications and dozens of high profile conferences each year.

While affectionately known as the "father of the MIRECCs," Dr. Horvath remained an engaged clinician, taking attending calls for



Edgar L. Tucker, Medical Center Director

psychiatry and personally treating some of the most refractory patients, especially those with combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder.

Dr. Horvath has also been a key player in the fourth mission of the VA: emergency preparedness. During Tropical Storm Allison in 2001, he was elected as co-director of the City of Houston's medical recovery plan. With Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, Houston Mayor Bill White appointed him to his recovery council.

Within VA, Dr. Horvath spearheaded the effort to provide tertiary care services to the entire Gulf Coast region after the destruction of the VA hospital in New Orleans and the severe damage sustained by the VA hospital in Biloxi, Mississippi.

An immensely talented physician and clinical leader, Dr. Horvath has set the bar high for all of us. While he will continue to teach health care providers of the future and conduct research on behalf of our veterans, Dr. Horvath will, most importantly, continuously remind us who we serve and why.

Thank you, Dr. Horvath! ♦

New 64-Slice CT Scanner Advances DeBakey VA's Radiology Capabilities

HOUSTON - Late last year, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) began clinical use of the latest technology in computed tomography (CT) imaging software and machinery, a 64-slice CT scanner.

While current generation CT scanners are fine for most applications, the newly installed device produces precise diagnostic pictures within 10 seconds, enabling health care providers to "freeze" motion and better define certain disease processes. For patients experiencing symptoms associated with heart disease, the new scanner provides improved resolution of images of the coronary arteries that may prevent the need for more invasive testing.

"Within just the last few years, CT scanning technology has made incredible strides as a diagnostic tool," said Charles Jones, R.T., chief technologist, Radiology Section. "As recently as last year, the technical gold standard was 16-slice, which required the patient to hold their breath for 25 to 40 seconds, as compared to eight to 12 seconds with the 64-slice CT scanner."

The scanner is invaluable in diagnosing and evaluating blood flow in organs such as the liver and kidney, monitoring changes in tumor size, searching the lungs for pulmonary emboli, identifying narrowed brain arteries, and pinpointing other neurological problems.

To produce a CT image, computer-driven machinery passes X-rays through

the body, producing digitized signals that are detected and reconstructed. Each X-ray measurement lasts just a fraction of a second and represents a "slice" of an organ or tissue. The greater the number of detectors, the better the speed and resolution of the picture. A computer then uses these slices to reconstruct highly detailed, three dimensional images of the heart, other organs, and blood vessels throughout the body. In most cases, a patient is injected with a contrast solution to increase the visual detail.

"This new technology will give us better pictures in a shorter amount of time," said Meena Vij, M.D., Diagnostic and Therapeutic Care Line executive. "Single slice CT scanners would give us about 75 images per study, the new 64 slice gives us one thousand. And the 3-D imagery allows us to see more of the body and find things that routinely did not turn up on a regular CT scan. This new technology is opening up a whole new door in diagnosing and treating disease."

"The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center is proud to be known for providing our veterans with the latest technology," said Thomas B. Horvath, M.D., chief of staff. "While we need the critical anatomical information we get from a CT scan, we always want to limit the x-ray dose to the absolute minimum possible. The new 64-slice CT scanner features advanced technology to ensure we get exceptional images with relatively small increases in the radiation dose to the patient." ♦

Advanced Surgery for Epilepsy

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neurosurgeons working with neurophysiology technicians, neuro-radiologists, neuropsychologists, and neurology nurses.

"The primary aim is to pinpoint the location of the seizure-generating brain areas and identify what functions that region of the brain might be involved," said Richard Hrachovy, M.D., a MEDVAMC neurophysiologist with more than 25 years experience in epilepsy evaluation and management.

"When the area causing seizures is far removed from areas having important brain functions, the surgical procedure is not unlike other kinds of brain surgery. However, if language, motor, or visual areas are located close to the surgical target, we may choose to wake up the patient during surgery and electrically map out the region to avoid damaging critical functions," said neurosurgeon Daniel Yoshor, M.D. "This 'awake surgery' lessens the risk of neurological deficits from the surgery."

Surgery has the potential to relieve seizure activity in more than 70 percent of appropriately selected patients with temporal lobe epilepsy. But, Ehni notes, after five to 10 years, "a significant number of patients relapse. This failure is the subject of intense research. Recent data suggests the biggest predictor of relapse is the number of years for which a patient experienced uncontrolled seizures before undergoing surgery. I think we are learning that surgery should not be put off as a last resort. For some



"Epilepsy treatment has evolved to include consideration of the patient's quality of life, not just the number of seizures," said David Chen, M.D., Neurophysiology Laboratory director above with Betty J. Calaban, R.EEGT., Neurophysiology supervisor.

patients, it may be best to pursue this option as soon as it is evident that medications are not likely to control seizures."

Epilepsy is the second most common serious neurological condition in the United States after stroke. According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke about 125,000 new patients develop epilepsy each year.

"The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center is proud to be known for providing our veterans with the most advanced technology available in the health care industry today," said Thomas A. Kent, M.D., Neurology Care Line executive. "We are working to expand our Comprehensive Epilepsy Program to serve as a regional referral site for veterans with complex epilepsy from the entire Gulf Coast region." ♦

New Law Enhances Benefits for Veterans

WASHINGTON, D.C. – In an effort to improve benefits for many of our nation's veterans, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2008 extends the period of enhanced VA health care eligibility provided to veterans who served in a theater of combat operations after November 11, 1998. This includes combat veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in Iraq.

Under the "Combat Veteran" authority, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides cost-free health care services and nursing home care for conditions possibly related to military service and enrollment in Priority Group 6, unless the veteran is eligible for enrollment in a higher priority of care.

This new benefit applies to OEF/OIF veterans, currently enrolled veterans, and new enrollees who were discharged from active duty on or after January 28,

2003 and is good for five years after discharge. Additionally, veterans discharged from active duty before January 28, 2003, who apply for enrollment on or after January 28, 2008, are eligible for the enhanced benefit until January 27, 2011.

Veterans, including activated Reservists and members of the National Guard, are eligible if they served on active duty in a theater of combat operations after November 11, 1998, and have an honorable discharge. Health benefits include cost-free VA health care and medications provided for conditions potentially related to combat service.

Additional benefits for all military members, who are eligible veterans, also include expansion of dental eligibility and a change in beneficiary travel benefits.

Veterans who served on active duty 90 days or more are eligible to receive one-time VA dental benefits if they make an application to VA within 180 days post discharge from active duty and if their discharge forms (DD Forms 214) does not indicate necessary dental treatment had been provided with 90 days of release from active duty. This basically doubles the time for members to receive their benefits.

On Feb. 1, 2008, beneficiary travel reimbursement rate is increased to 28.5 cents per mile for travel to or from a VA or VA-approved non-VA facility for the purpose of examination, treatment, or care. The deductible for travel is \$7.77 one way or \$15.54 for a round-trip, with a monthly cap of \$46.62 after which travel payments are free of deductibles. ♦



Veterans in southeast Texas with questions about VA health care eligibility or enrollment should call (713) 794-7288. OEF/OIF veterans are also encouraged to contact the OEF/OIF Support Team at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center at (713) 794-7034/8825 or by email vhabouOEF/OIF@va.gov. The VA Eligibility Web site is www.va.gov/healthbeligibility.

Yearly eye exams are critical ...

If You Have Diabetes, Don't Wait to Save Your Sight

HOUSTON - According to the American Diabetes Association (ADA) if you have been diagnosed with diabetes, a yearly dilated eye examination is as important for managing diabetes as monitoring blood sugar and watching your diet. If you wait until you notice problems, it may be too late to save your sight.

The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) has new technology to screen for diabetic changes that can occur in your eyes. The VA's Teleretinal Program incorporates ADA guidelines and recommendations for prevention, detection, and treatment of diabetic retinopathy.

Blindness is a possible complication of diabetes. One common cause of blindness in diabetics is diabetic retinopathy.

Diabetic retinopathy is caused by a breakdown in the vessels supplying blood and oxygen to the retina at the back of the eye. The blood vessels eventually begin to leak and bleed.

You might not know you have diabetic retinopathy because there are no symptoms in the earlier stages of the disease. A dilated eye exam is necessary for early detection and allows for early treatment before the disease becomes irreversible, leading to blindness.

Important Points to Remember:

- ✓ Early diagnosis of diabetic retinopathy is vital.
- ✓ Have an eye examination every year.
- ✓ Do not wait until your vision has deteriorated to have an eye examination.
- ✓ Most sight-threatening diabetic problems can be managed by laser treatment if provided early enough.
- ✓ Do not be afraid to ask questions or express fears about your treatment.

If you have diabetes and have not had a dilated eye exam in the past year, call Misty Spratlan, MEDVAMC Teleretinal Imaging Ophthalmic assistant, at (713) 794-8056 to schedule an appointment. ♦

What is Heart Failure?

HOUSTON - In the United States, there are approximately five million people living with heart failure and more than half a million new cases diagnosed each year. Heart failure is the most common reason for admission into the hospital; however, African Americans have a higher incidence of heart failure than other groups.

What is heart failure?

Heart failure occurs when the heart is no longer able to pump adequate amounts of blood to meet the body's needs. This chronic condition worsens over time and is incurable, but is treatable using medications and making lifestyle changes.

The most common type of heart failure occurs on the left side of the heart in the left ventricle, the heart chamber responsible for pumping oxygenated blood from the heart into the body.

There are two types of left sided heart failure: systolic heart failure and diastolic heart failure. Systolic heart failure is when the left ventricle is too weak to pump blood into circulation. This causes blood to be retained in the enlarged ventricle where it backs up into the lungs. This causes pulmonary edema, congestion, and shortness of breath.

Diastolic heart failure is when the left ventricle becomes stiff and cannot relax enough for blood to adequately fill the chamber. This also causes shortness of breath and congestion.

A common measurement used to assess heart function is the ejection fraction (EF), this measurement is a

calculation of how much blood is pumped out of the heart with each beat. A normal EF is 50 percent.

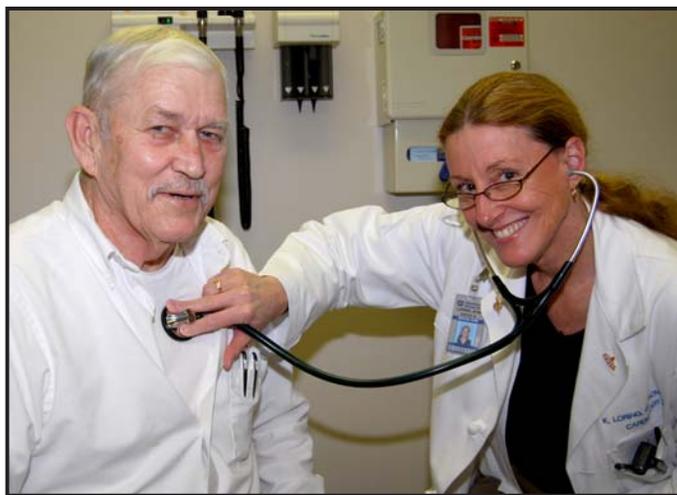
As the left side of the heart gets worse, it eventually causes the right side of the heart to also fail. This happens because blood backs up into the lungs from the weakened left side of the heart. The right side has to work harder to pump the blood from the right ventricle into the lungs, and eventually, this damages the right side, too. When this happens, blood then backs up into the body causing fluid retention and swelling in the legs, ankles, and abdomen.

What causes heart failure?

The most common causes of heart failure are long-term, uncontrolled high blood pressure, history of heart attack, coronary artery disease, long standing alcohol and drug abuse, especially cocaine. Other causes are infections, damaged or congenital heart valve abnormalities, exposure to other cardio toxins such as some chemotherapeutic agents to treat certain cancers, and pericardial disease.

How is heart failure treated?

The first step in treating heart failure is to determine the cause of the heart failure and correct the underlying problem. This may involve many different tests and procedures, even surgery. The next step is taking medications to help control, not only the underlying problem, but also the symptoms. The third step involves lifestyle changes such as dietary restriction



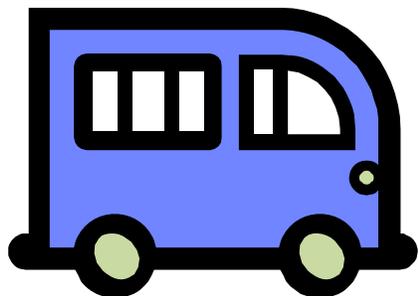
Heart failure affects approximately five million people in the United States; however, the symptoms of this disease can be controlled if you take your medications, limit salt, and exercise every day. Heart Failure Nurse Practitioner Kathy Loring, ACNP-BC, examines veteran Donald Clay during a recent appointment.

of salt and fluid, weight loss, and increasing activity to help strengthen the heart muscle. Finally, a patient must be closely monitored for overall health, symptoms, and medications.

Other treatments for heart failure may include a catheterization procedure to examine the arteries on the heart for adequate blood flow or a pacemaker to stimulate the heart to beat normally. Additional devices to improve heart function are a defibrillator to shock the heart if there is a life threatening arrhythmia and a bi-ventricular pacemaker to make the right and left sides of the ventricles work at a more

normal pumping rhythm.

Common medications for heart failure include diuretics to remove retained fluid. Ace inhibitors dilate the arteries, reduce hormones secreted by the kidneys that cause water retention, and slow progression of heart failure. Beta blockers lower blood pressure, slow the heart rate, and reduce the heart's stress to improve heart function. Other medications include isosorbide dinitrate and hydralazine to dilate arteries and veins, and digoxin to improve the pumping of the heart and control the rhythm of the heart. Angiotensin II receptor blockers are given to patients who cannot tolerate ace inhibitors.



Free Transportation to VA Appointments

Transportation to and from the MEDVAMC in Houston from outlying areas is available by way of vans operated by various veteran service organizations and local government offices. The vans are operated as a free service for veterans seeking medical care. Veterans are advised to call at least a week before their appointment, as several vans require reservations. Reservations are made on a first-come, first-serve basis. Call for availability, pick-up points, and schedule information.

Transportation to and from the MEDVAMC in Houston:

Bay City Van (979) 323-9235	Harris County Social Services Transportation (713) 696-1985
Beaumont Vans (409) 981-8550	Lufkin Bus (936) 633-2740
Brazoria County Van (979) 864-1289	Montgomery County Vans (936) 756-5828
Conroe Van (936) 756-7614	Willis Van (936) 856-5224
El Campo Van (979) 578-8387	Woodville/Tyler County Van (409) 283-2493
Harris County Precinct #2 Van (281) 452-6071	

Transportation to and from the Texas City Outpatient Clinic:

Baytown, Channelview, Deer Park & Pasadena Van (281) 452-6071

The Houston METRO offers discount fares to persons with disabilities and senior citizens. These discounts are available for both local and commuter fixed-route buses, which are all wheelchair accessible. Riders age 62 through 69 may apply for the senior citizen discount. Riders age 70 and over may travel for free using the 70+ lifetime pass if eligible. METRO's RideStores are located downtown at 1001 Travis and 1900 Main St., open Monday-Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Call METROLine at (713) 635-4000 for more information on discounts or METRO RideStores.

What can you do?

Patients need to take an active roll in controlling their symptoms. Limit your amount of salt intake to no more than two grams (2,000 mg) in a 24-hour period. Do this by reading food labels, counting up a days worth of salt, and keeping within the set limit. Salt causes your body to retain water, making you swell and become short of breath.

Take your medications every day. They may make you feel more tired at first; but over time, your body will adjust. The medications will help your heart work better and pump stronger.

Weigh yourself every day and bring this record with you to each medical appointment. Make sure your weight is close to what your health care provider says it should be. If you have extra pounds, your heart works harder to pump blood and this can further weaken an already weak heart.

Exercise every day. Walking is great exercise that improves heart function without stressful impact to joints. Aim to walk at least 30 minutes every day, even if you have to break it up into shorter sessions until your heart gets stronger.

Finally, if you have diabetes, control your blood sugar. Prolonged elevated high blood sugar levels causes damage to blood vessels, and eventually, aggravates your heart failure.

Heart failure is not curable, but the symptoms can be controlled if you take your medications, limit salt, and exercise every day. By following this advice, you can dramatically improve your quality of life. ♦ *Kathy Loring, ACNP-BC, Heart Failure Nurse Practitioner*

Posture – Improve Breathing and Digestive Processes

HOUSTON - Tall sitting posture – you just can't beat it for helping you look better, feel better, and improve your internal functions. But, it does get harder to maintain as some types of disease progress. In the May/June 2007 issue of this newspaper, I wrote about increasing your awareness of good posture. Now, it is time to begin an exercise program to reinforce your efforts at improving and maintaining good postural control. The exercise program has two phases – stretching and strengthening, so let's begin!

(This article is for educational purposes only and should not be considered as medical treatment. Readers should consult their health care providers for advice.)

Activities designed to stretch tight muscles in the head/trunk area:

While sitting upright on a firm chair, begin by loosening the muscles around your neck:

1. Slowly tilt your head forward and drop your chin to your breastbone, gently stretching the muscles along the back of your neck, follow this by lifting your head up and back so your chin points toward the ceiling and the muscles on the front of your neck get stretched. Repeat each movement three times.

2. Starting with your head erect with your ears positioned over your shoulder blades, slowly turn your head to the right to stretch the muscles on the left side of your neck followed by a full turn to the left to stretch the muscles on the right side of the neck. Repeat each movement three times.

Continue by stretching some muscles within your trunk and chest:

1. Sitting upright on a firm surface in your best sitting alignment, begin by pulling your shoulder blades up toward your ears, back toward your spine, down toward your waist, and forward toward your chest. Focus on moving your shoulder blades as far as possible in each direction. Repeat this rotation movement eight to 10 times. Finish by taking a deep breath and lifting your shoulder blades up and back.

2. Now gently twist your entire spine by rotating your ribcage to the right, bringing your right arm behind the chair you are sitting in and your left arm reaching across your chest. Turn your head the same direction and hold that position to the count of five while feeling the stretch within your waist and spine. Slowly release and rotate your upper body fully to the left, placing your left arm behind the chair and your right arm reaching across the front of your body. Hold to the count of five, and then repeat the twisting movements in each direction two more times.

Activities designed to strengthen weak muscles in the head/trunk area:

Do the following exercises while seated forward on a firm chair. Whenever your hips are forward on a chair rather than all the way back, your spine is more flexible and ready to work harder:

1. Start with your arms crossed at the wrists with your right hand on your left knee and your left hand on your right knee. Lift your arms up and over the top of your head uncrossing them as you go and taking a deep breath as you lift your arms. Return your hands to their original positions while letting the air out of your lungs. Repeat this movement 10 times, lifting your arms as far overhead as possible and straightening your back with each arm lift.

2. While sitting up with good postural alignment, lift your arms out to the side with the elbows bent so your fisted hands touch lightly at the level of your chin. Pinch your shoulder blades together and pull both arms behind your back while opening your chest as far as possible. Inhale while pulling your shoulders back and exhale while bringing your hands back together in the front. Repeat this movement six to eight times while concentrating on keeping your upper back extended and straight.

3. This last movement is in multiple parts. Reach both arms over your head taking the time to straighten out your back. Bend your elbows and bring your



U.S. Air Force veteran Nancy Hough and U.S. Navy veteran Patrick Concannon begin an exercise program to improve and maintain good postural control. The exercise program has two phases – stretching and strengthening.

hands down to touch your shoulders while keeping your spine completely straight. Next, straighten your arms to reach forward while beginning to bend at your hips and incline your trunk over your legs. Continue to reach forward, bending at the hips and not the back, until your shoulders are over your knees. Return to upright sitting, bringing your hands back to your shoulders. Begin the process again by reaching up and overhead. Repeat the reaching process

five times while keeping the muscles aligned along your spine, working hard to keep your back straight.

Sounds simple. Right? Four simple stretches and three activities to keep your back strong. So, why not get busy and improve the muscles in your trunk, which in turn will help you control the movements of your arms and legs? ♦ Betty MacNeill, PT, Med, Associate Professor, School of Physical Therapy, Texas Woman's University, Houston

How to Get to New Visual Impairment Center on Houston VA Complex

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) continues to expand its rehabilitation programs for low vision and blind veterans. The MEDVAMC recently converted Bldg. 120 (the old Education building just inside the Old Spanish Trail gate) to a new, 2,900 square foot home for its Visual Impairment Service Team, Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist program, and new Visual Impairment Services Outpatient Rehabilitation (VISOR) program.

MetroLift has added a new stop near Bldg. 120 to accommodate special needs patients visiting the new Visual Impairment Services Center.

There are six parking spaces behind

Bldg. 120 designated for low vision and blind veterans, and their caregivers. Patients will be given a parking pass when they check in at the Visual Impairment Services Center. All other vehicles will be ticketed and/or towed.

Low vision and blind veterans, who are in the main hospital building and need to go to the new Visual Impairment Services Center, should go to the new waiting area located at the Old Spanish Trail Entrance (Transitional Care Center/Nursing Home Entrance). A volunteer there will arrange for an escort to the Visual Impairment Services Center.

For more information about the new Visual Impairment Services Center, contact Bill Johnson at (713) 794-7532. ♦

Test Your Nutrition IQ!

by Erin Pankewicz, Dietetic Intern

Have you ever wondered how much you really know about nutrition? A few of the basics may help you have a better diet and improve your health! Take this simple test and find out your nutrition IQ.



- Certain fats are good for you, like those found in fish, nuts, and olive oil.
True or False
- You get as much nutrition from taking a multi-vitamin as eating healthy food.
True or False
- How many servings of fruits and vegetables should you eat every day?
a) 2 cups
b) 3 cups
c) 4 cups
d) 5 cups
- Which of these foods is low in sodium?
a) TV dinners
b) Canned soup
c) Fresh fruit
d) Ramen noodles
- Which is the best meal of the day to skip?
a) Breakfast
b) Lunch
c) Dinner
d) None of the above
- I should cut out trans fat from my diet.
True or False
- Which food is *not* a good source of fiber?
a) Beans
b) A Donut
c) Whole Grain Bread
d) An Apple
- One serving of meat should be the size of _____.
a) A closed fist
b) A deck of cards
c) A CD disk
d) Two fingers
- What is the recommended amount of time you should exercise daily?
a) 10 minutes
b) 20 minutes
c) 30 minutes
d) 90 minutes
- What is the first thing you should look for on the nutrition facts label?
a) Serving size
b) Calories
c) Sugars
d) Total fat



Turn to page 7 for answers and to score your Nutrition IQ.

5 Heart Healthy Habits

HOUSTON – Forty percent of all deaths in the U.S. are caused by the many forms of cardiovascular disease. This includes hypertension, heart attack, stroke, and heart failure. Though family history plays a part in the development of heart disease, following these five heart healthy habits can prevent and treat this widespread disease.

1. Limit saturated and trans fats.

Keeping your heart healthy involves maintaining a low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol value. Maintaining or lowering this “bad” cholesterol involves restricting saturated and trans fats from your diet. Saturated fats are found in animal sources including meat, butter, and whole milk, and oils such as palm and coconut. Instead, choose chicken, fish, lean pork, drink skim or low-fat milk, and cook with liquid vegetable oils instead of butter or shortening. Trans fats are partially hydrogenated oils added to many food items; for example, chips, baked goods, and crackers to increase their shelf life in grocery stores. It is easy to figure out what foods contain trans fat because of the labeling laws requiring the amount of this fat be present on each nutrition facts label. Choose items that read “No trans fats” on the label.

2. Add fish to your diet

Not only is fish a good source of protein and low in artery-clogging saturated fat, but it also contains omega-

3 fatty acids which reduce the risk of heart disease. Lake trout, herring, sardines, tuna, and salmon are all rich sources of this “good fat.” Along with the heart healthy benefits of omega-3 fatty acids, current research is exploring the additional possibility of a reduction in allergies, asthma, and eczema in people with overactive immune systems.

3. Exercise for better health

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 60 percent of Americans do not exercise regularly. If you are in this category, perhaps you don’t know that exercise controls weight, maintains healthy bones, muscles, and joints, promotes psychological well-being, and reduces the risk of premature death. The risks of high blood pressure and diabetes are reduced along with the risk of death from heart disease. To keep your heart healthy, get up and move for at least 30 to 60 minutes every day.

4. Snack the healthy way

How many servings of fruits and vegetables are you supposed to eat every day? If you answered one or two, you are depriving your body of many essential vitamins and minerals you need to thrive. The correct answer is five or more servings each day; specifically, at least two fruits and three vegetables. These nutrient-dense foods have the ability to reduce the risk of some



MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern Danielle Hayek discusses the benefits of daily exercise and good nutrition with U.S. Navy Veteran Forece Hilliard. For counseling with a registered dietitian, call the MEDVAMC Nutrition Clinic at (713) 791-1414, ext. 4295 or ext. 6166.

cancers, improve memory, and promote heart health. If you are striving to look youthful as long as possible, fruits and vegetables can delay the signs of aging. Fruits also contain fiber which can both lower cholesterol and improve digestive health. The best way to begin adding fruits and vegetables to your diet is to have them as snacks. Apples, bananas, berries, grapes, carrots, celery, and tomatoes are easy to carry with you.

5. Maintain a healthy weight

Want to live longer, feel and look

better, and increase your quality of life? Excess body weight increases LDL cholesterol and triglyceride levels, blood pressure, and blood sugar levels, all which place you at higher risk for heart disease and diabetes. The key to weight loss is taking small steps. Eating smaller portion sizes, exercising more, and avoiding high-calorie foods, including staying away from those drive-thru windows, are ways to lower calories everyday. It is a good idea to aim for a slow and steady weight loss of one to two pounds per week rather, than for larger weight losses.

Support Group Listing

Talk with a social worker on your nursing unit or in your Prime Care Clinic about available support groups.

Vet to Vet Support Group

Meets every Wednesday, 6-7 p.m. and every Thursday, 9-10 a.m. & 11 a.m.-noon. No facilitator involved. POC: Dr. Sara Allison, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6729

MS Self-Help Group

Meets 2nd Wednesday every month, 2-3:30 p.m., SCI Dayroom (NU) 1B. Facilitators: Lisa Whipple, (713) 794-7951 & Fe Runtanilla, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4559

Parkinson's Disease Education/Support Group

Contact facilitators for information: Naomi Nelson, (713) 794-8938 & Lisa Whipple, (713) 794-7951

Cancer Support Group

Meets 2nd Tuesday every month, 2-3 p.m., Cancer Center Family Room, Room 4C-365. Facilitators: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, (713) 791-1414, ext. 5273 & Chaplain Douglas Ensminger, (713) 794-7200

Better Breather's Club

Meets last Wednesday every month, 1:30 p.m., Room 3C-371, Home Oxygen Clinic. Facilitator: Paula Denman, (713) 794-8979

Pain Relaxation Training Group

Meets every Wednesday, 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Hepatitis C Support Group

Meets 1st Friday every month, 1:30 p.m., Primecare Clinic 5, Room 1A-442. Facilitators: Stacey Pelton, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6867 & Michelle Ray, (713) 791-1414, ext. 3394

Prostate Cancer Support Group

Meets 3rd Wednesday every month, 10 a.m., Cancer Center Conference Room, 4C-345. Facilitators: Tonjala Seals, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6227

Pain Management for Women

Meets every Friday, 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Pain Education Group

Meets every Wednesday, 2 p.m., Room 5C-215. Facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Alzheimer's & Dementia Caregivers Group

Meets 3rd Tuesday every month, 5 p.m., Room 1C-270. Facilitator: Yvonne S. Mack, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4082

Amputee Support Group

Meets 4th Wednesday every month, 3 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Dining Room. Facilitators: Anna Bracero, (713) 794-7816 & Betty Baer, (713) 794-7793

Mended Hearts (Heart Disease) Support Group

Meets 3rd Thursday every month, 11 a.m., Nursing Unit 2A Dining Room. Facilitators: Patricia Suarez, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6101 & Tommie Gonzalez, ext. 5254

HIV Support/Educational Group

Meets every Tuesday, 2 p.m., Clinic 4, Room 1A-442. Facilitator: Kathy Molitor, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6177 & Belinda Rainer, (713) 791-1414, ext. 5292

Pain Coping Skills Training Group

Meets every Tuesday, 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

Meets every Wednesday, 7 p.m., Room 6C-105. Facilitator: Bo Cook, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6987

Breast Cancer Support Group

Meets last Tuesday every month, 12 noon, Cancer Center Conference Room, 4C-345. Facilitators: Magdalena Ramirez (713) 791-1414, ext. 5287 & Shirley LaDay Smith, (713) 794-7926

Fibromylgia Education & Support Group

Contact facilitator for information: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Stroke Support Group

Meets 3rd Thursday every month, 3 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Dining Room. Facilitator: Kathryn Kertz, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4192

Adopting these heart healthy habits will improve your physical and mental health, overall well-being, and even your appearance. For more information about nutrition and healthy eating habits, visit www.cdc.gov/HealthyLiving. For counseling with a registered dietitian, call the MEDVAMC Nutrition Clinic at (713) 794-7349, ext. 4295 or ext. 6166. ♦ Danielle Hayek, MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern

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Extraordinary Local Veteran on Cheerios® Box



U.S. Army veteran David Fowler, from Katy, Tx. is one of 12 gold medal winners from last year's National Veterans Wheelchair Games who will be featured on Cheerios® boxes. The action photographs of these athletes will appear on the back and side panels of cereal boxes released in March 2008.

(continued from page 1)

sponsored by the VA and Paralyzed Veterans of America.

"After my first year attending the Wheelchair Games, I felt a sense of accomplishment and pride," said Fowler. "When I got home, I immediately started training for the following year."

The Veterans Canteen Service

provides food and retail services to VA-enrolled veterans across the country. The special edition Cheerios® boxes, featuring top wheelchair athletes in events ranging from track and field and archery to swimming and basketball, will be sold in military markets and Veterans Canteen retail stores.

"We are gratified General Mills has agreed to partner with us and honor the

spirit and athleticism of our disabled veterans by placing their pictures on one of the world's best known and most popular cereal products," said Marilyn Iverson, Veterans Canteen Service director.

In upcoming months, the Veterans Canteen Service and the VA will challenge veterans and staff to walk or roll '100 miles in 100 days' in the "Champions' Challenge." This program is designed to encourage veterans and employees to become more physically active while earning prizes along the way.

"Sports and recreation are an excellent way to test your limits. Good, healthy competition is a great tool to get back into life. Once you've accomplished your goal, you will ask yourself what else is out there that you can do. You will also find out you are not alone and there is life after an injury. With a positive attitude, nothing seems impossible," said Fowler.

During the 100 days of the "Champions' Challenge," Fowler will appear at the MEDVAMC for a special meet and greet. Free sports cards with his photograph and autograph will be available at the event. ♦ Fran Burke, MEDVAMC Public Affairs Specialist

Help Us Test a New Questionnaire!

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) and Baylor College of Medicine are conducting a study examining a new patient questionnaire.

Qualified veterans will receive \$20 for their time and participation. There are two required visits, now and again in three months, during which you will fill out questionnaires and answer questions about your mood and functioning.

In order to qualify, you must be a current psychiatry patient at the MEDVAMC.

For more information, contact Susan Hughes or Rayan Al Jurdi, M.D., psychiatrist and director of the MEDVAMC Mood Disorders Clinic at (713) 791-1414, ext. 6750. ♦

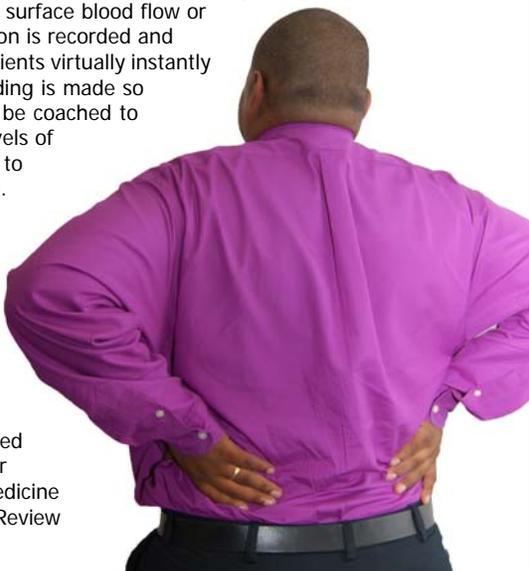
Do You Suffer from Chronic Lower Back Pain?

If you have experienced lower back pain for at least six months, you may be eligible to participate in a new research study at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center.

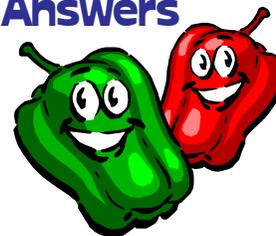
This study will assess the effectiveness of hypnosis and/or biofeedback in the treatment of pain. Hypnosis involves entering an altered state of consciousness; whereby, suggestions made while an individual is in an altered state can lead to changes in behavior or, in the case of pain, altered physical sensations.

Biofeedback is a process in which a physiological parameter such as near surface blood flow or muscle tension is recorded and shown to patients virtually instantly as the recording is made so patients can be coached to recognize levels of function and to control them.

For more information, call Donna Smith at (713) 794-7491. This study has been approved by the Baylor College of Medicine Institutional Review Board.



Nutrition IQ Test Answers



1. True. Polyunsaturated and mono-unsaturated fatty acids from fish, nuts, and olive oil can help lower low-density lipoprotein (LDL), the "bad" cholesterol

2. False. Nutrients in food are more easily absorbed by the body.

3. D You should eat at least 5 cups of fruits and vegetables a day to lower the risk of chronic diseases and get the fiber and folate you body needs.

4. C Sodium intake should be limited to about a teaspoon of salt (2,300 milligrams sodium) a day. Eating a lot of sodium is one factor that may raise blood pressure.

5. None of the above. All people need at least 3 meals or snacks a day to get all needed daily nutrients and maintain a healthy diet.

6. True. Trans fat is in stick margarine and many commercially fried foods and baked goods. Trans fat can increase low-density lipoprotein

(LDL), the "bad" cholesterol and decrease high-density lipo-protein (HDL), the "good" cholesterol. This may raise your risk of having a heart attack.

7. B Sweets like donuts do not have much fiber in them. The great thing about fiber is it will make you feel full longer.

8. B One serving of meat is the size of a deck of cards or about 3 ounces.

9. C Adults should exercise for at least 30 minutes, 5 or more days a week.

10. A The first thing to look for is the serving size. This will tell you what the rest of the information on the nutrition facts label is based on, such as calories and total fat.

How did you do?

Add up the number of correct answers you had.

1-3 Right Answers: For counseling with a registered dietitian, call the MEDVAMC Nutrition Clinic at (713) 794-7349, ext. 4295.

4-6 Right Answers: Good job! You have a solid grasp of nutrition. Ask your Prime Care Provider for more information about good nutrition.

7-10 Right Answers: Excellent! Keep up the good work!



**Answers
provided by the
Consumer Affairs Staff
Room 1B-270
(713) 794-7884
or email
vhahougeneralquestions@med.va.gov**

Question: What should I do if I have questions about my care?

Answer: The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center strives for excellence in patient care. We are always looking for ways to improve care for our veterans. To ensure we are meeting your needs, we want you to know what actions to take if you have a problem and what you should expect from our staff. Our goal is to resolve issues at the point of occurrence. To find solutions to concerns you have, please take the following steps:

Step 1: Speak clearly and calmly to the person with whom you are having a problem. Make sure they understand what you want. It is every employee's job to listen to your concerns in an appropriate and effective manner. Your care will never be jeopardized because you have a complaint. If either the staff

member or you are unable to resolve the issue, proceed to Step 2.

Step 2: Ask another person to help you resolve the issue. This can be a person on your treatment team. Or, you might wish to ask for the help of a supervisor or administrative officer in the area. If your concerns are not taken care of to your satisfaction, proceed to Step 3.

Step 3: You may ask to speak to the service chief, service line executive, or care line executive in the area where you are having a problem. The service chief, service line executive, or care line executive will listen to your concerns and help to find a solution to your problem. If he/she is unable to resolve the issue at this level, proceed to Step 4.

Step 4: Seek the help of a patient advocate in the Consumer Affairs Office on the first floor of the medical center. Each outpatient clinic also has a patient advocate. The first questions the Advocate will ask you are: "With whom have you spoken with?" and "How have you tried to resolve this problem?" As the Medical Center Director's representative, the advocate's goal is to help you work with the staff. Since you are a partner in your health care, we want to help you manage your care and treatment needs with your team. Toward this effort, the advocate may prepare you to begin talking with the person with whom you are having the problem. Our patient advocates will also review your concerns and provide guidance on effective ways for you to work through the issues raised.

Step 5: After following the steps above, you believe the MEDVAMC has

not satisfactorily addressed your concerns regarding quality and safety of care, you may contact the Joint Commission's Office of Quality Monitoring to report your concern or register a complaint by calling 1-800-994-6610 or by e-mailing complaint@jointcommission.org.

Question: Does the VA have a nursing hotline?

Answer: The MEDVAMC operates the VA Network Telecare Center Hotline at (713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1-800-639-5137. Registered nurses, social workers, and mental health professionals are ready to provide emergency counseling assistance, make appointments, and answer veteran health care questions 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Question: How do I get more news and information about the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and veterans' health care?

Answer: Send an e-mail to bobbi.gruner@med.va.gov to sign up to receive news releases and information. You can also visit www.houston.med.va.gov and click on the "News Center" symbol.

Question: I am having some problems coping since I got back from Iraq, but I don't want to go to the hospital. Is there other help?

Answer: The Houston Vet Centers provide readjustment counseling and outreach services to all veterans who served in any combat zone in consumer-friendly facilities apart from traditional VA medical centers. Services are also available for their family members for military related issues. In Houston, one

Vet Center is located at 701 N. Post Oak Road, (713) 682-2288, and the other at 2990 Richmond Avenue, Suite 225, (713) 523-0884.

Question: How can I determine my eligibility for VA health benefits in light of the new National Defense Authorization Act of 2008?

Answer: To assist combat veterans and employees in determining eligibility for health benefits, VA has implemented an interactive health benefits calculator at www.va.gov/healtheligibility. The veteran or user simply enters the combat veteran's enrollment status (enrolled or not enrolled) and their most recent service separation date into the form, and the calculator returns the new end date for the veteran's enhanced enrollment date or whether this new provision has any impact. See page 3 of this newspaper for more information.

Question: Does the VA have a suicide prevention hotline?

Answer: Veterans experiencing emotional and suicidal crisis, and their concerned family members or friends, have immediate access to emergency counseling services 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Question: How do I file compensation and disability claims with the VA?

Answer: Contact the Houston VA Regional Office to file claims for combat related illnesses and injuries at (713) 383-1999 or toll free 1-800-827-1000, or visit www.vba.va.gov on the Web.

Important VA Telephone Numbers

Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center	(713) 791-1414 or toll-free 1-800-553-2278
VA Network Telecare Center	(713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1-800-639-5137
Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic	(409) 981-8550 or toll-free 1-800-833-7734
Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic (Lufkin)	(936) 637-1342 or toll-free 1-800-209-3120
Conroe VA Outpatient Clinic	(936) 522-4000
Galveston VA Outpatient Clinic	(409) 741-0256 or toll-free 1-800-310-5001
Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic	(409) 986-1129 or toll-free 1-800-310-5001
Pharmacy Refills	(713) 794-7648 or toll-free 1-800-454-1062
Pharmacy Helpline	(713) 794-7653
Suicide Prevention Hotline	toll-free 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
Appointment Information	(713) 794-7648 or toll-free 1-800-454-1062
VA Eligibility & Enrollment	(713) 794-7288
Operations Enduring Freedom & Iraqi Freedom Coordinators	
Fern Taylor	(713) 794-7034
Vickie Toliver	(713) 794-8825
Vet Center (701 N. Post Oak Road)	
Vet Center (2990 Richmond Ave.)	(713) 682-2288 (713) 523-0884
Patient Representatives	
Houston/Galveston/Texas City	(713) 794-7884
Beaumont	1-800-833-7734, ext. 113
Conroe	(936) 522-4010, ext. 1952
Lufkin	(936) 633-2753
Houston VA National Cemetery	
	(281) 447-8686
VA Regional Office	
Main Number	(713) 383-1999 or toll-free 1-800-827-1000
Compensation/Pension	1-800-827-1000
Home Loans	1-888-232-2571

*The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center
presents a special*

American Ex-POW Program

honoring our Nation's Former Prisoners of War

Wednesday, April 9, 2008, 10 a.m.
4th Floor Auditorium

Guest Speaker: John Gutierrez
Former World War II POW



A 19-year-old, Army Air Corps gunner, Gutierrez' Flying Fortress, a four-engine heavy bomber aircraft, was shot down over Kassel, Germany on July 28, 1943. After almost two years imprisonment of which 20 months were spent in the infamous Stalag XVIIB, he was one of more than 4,000 prisoners of war forced to endure an 18-day, 281-mile march through rugged, freezing Austrian terrain when the Germans fled the approach of Russian forces. On May 7, 1945, he was liberated by Patton's Third Army.

*Refreshments served. For more information,
contact the Public Affairs Office at (713) 794-7349.*