

**Department of Veterans Affairs
Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Service**

**Report to the
Intersociety Pathology Council
Sunday, February 12, 2006**

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The Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Service continues to provide high quality services to support patient care in the nation's largest integrated healthcare system. All of the laboratories in the VA continue to be fully accredited by external inspection agencies. Many VA laboratories continue to provide valuable training experiences for both resident physicians and non-physician laboratorians through affiliation agreements. VA pathologists continue to provide high quality diagnostic, educational, and research services.

There are a number of significant projects that involve the VA Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Service (P&LMS).

- The Laboratory System Re-engineering Initiative: This is a project to re-engineer the VA's laboratory information system which is but one component of the VA's electronic medical record. Enhancements to improve appropriate utilization of laboratory resources, interface with a national "health data repository", and provide "decision support" to clinical providers are but are few examples of specifications being designed for the re-engineered system.
- The Bar Code Expansion Project: While the VA for many years has used barcode technology in medication administration, this project is designed to add functionalities for labeling of lab specimens, blood component administration, vital signs, enhancement of medication administration, and read access to the patient's electronic medical record (i.e. CPRS) using wireless technology. The most significant aspect of the BCE project is to improve patient safety and reduce medical errors.
- The Laboratory Data Sharing Initiative: This project is to improve that ability to bidirectionally transmit lab data (e.g. requests for tests and test results) between VA and Department of Defense (DoD) facilities. Many VAs have memorandums of agreement to provide or receive lab services from adjacent regional DoD facilities. This project is but one element of the ongoing joint working initiative between the VA and DoD. A key element of this initiative is to develop "standardized data" so that there can be efficient "messaging" between the VA and DoD laboratory information systems.
- The VISTA Blood Establishment Computer Software (VBECS) Project: This project is nearing completion. It will require FDA approval, but it represents a re-write of the

blood bank software for the VA VISTA system. Beta testing is currently occurring at field facilities. Implementation is projected for later in 2006.

- The Quality Improvement Project of the P&LMS Regional Commissioners Program: The VA Regional Commissioners Program is analogous to the CMS CLIA lab oversight program. VA Regional Medical Technologists visit VA labs, and conduct audits to monitor compliance with VA regulations and external accrediting agency standards. In addition, the Regional Commissioners have embarked on a program to utilize innovative, non-traditional monitors to assess quality in VA labs. A consensus audit tool is being developed for field testing.
- Implementation of Hybrid Title 38 Personnel Standards for VA Medical Technologists: In 2003 Congress passed legislation converting the medical technologist occupation series from Title 5 to Hybrid Title 38. This triggered a review of the standards used to classify and grade this occupation series, and the need to develop new guidance for recruitment and hiring. Details of the implementation of the legislation for the field are still being developed, but the expected outcome will be improvement in the ability to recruit, hire, and compensate medical technologists. The VA already has in place processes for special salary rates, tuition support, and other programs to assist recruitment. The VA encourages local medical centers to become clinical affiliates of allied health schools to aid in the training of laboratory professionals.
- The Armed Forces Institute of Pathology: The VA continues to have an important affiliation agreement with the AFIP. The AFIP provides consultative services as well as important quality assurance services in anatomic pathology for the VA. The VA is very concerned about the future of the AFIP. All of organized pathology should be united to support federal legislation to assure a secure future for all of the functions of the AFIP. The AFIP is indeed a “national treasure” for pathology, not only for its tissue repositories, but for the public health and welfare functions that it provides.

While there are various other issues and programs that are the responsibility of the VA P&LMS, this brief synopsis highlights a few of the key projects.