

me for Shinseki step down at VA

VA scandal over alleged "wait lists" for health care treatments, which may have contributed to the deaths of dozens of veterans whose treatment delayed, is still unfolding. The allegations at the core of the scandal are hardly new: A December 2012 report by the Government Accountability Office revealed that four VA medical centers nationwide hid wait list data and backlogged appointments for the purpose of fabricating compliance department timeliness.

Shinseki should have served as a warning wake-up call to clean up and bring overdue transparency and reform to what long has been viewed as the most dysfunctional agency in the federal government.

However, it is clear that in the months since that report was released, VA is still widely failing to charge to provide timely medical care for the nation's veterans as demand for those services grows.

Because there are concerns that falsification of records at Phoenix VA included criminal activities which have brought federal prosecutors into the picture.

Simply put, things are getting no better, in VA medical centers veterans are the victims of medical incompetence, negligence and possibly malfeasance. Situations such as this, the worst stop at the top: After years on the job, it is time for Secretary Eric Shinseki to own up.

One can deny that Shinseki, a combat veteran with Purple Hearts who has given years of selfless service to his country, is a man of honor and integrity. And his concern and passion for his fellow veterans is heartfelt. He has led efforts to get homeless veterans off

the streets and reduce the backlog of disability benefits claims.

But going back to his four-star days as Army chief of staff, Shinseki has long been recognized as a behind-the-scenes leader, one who uses his influence outside the public eye. Unfortunately, that's simply the wrong style for what VA needs now: a forceful, highly visible leader who publicly demands reforms and bluntly details the resources necessary to carry them out — someone who will hold people accountable, bruise egos when necessary and push hard to bring VA into the modern age.

VA will never be fully successful in its broad, critical mission without a comprehensive, system-wide rebuild. It stands today as a model of outdated programs and wasteful inefficiencies.

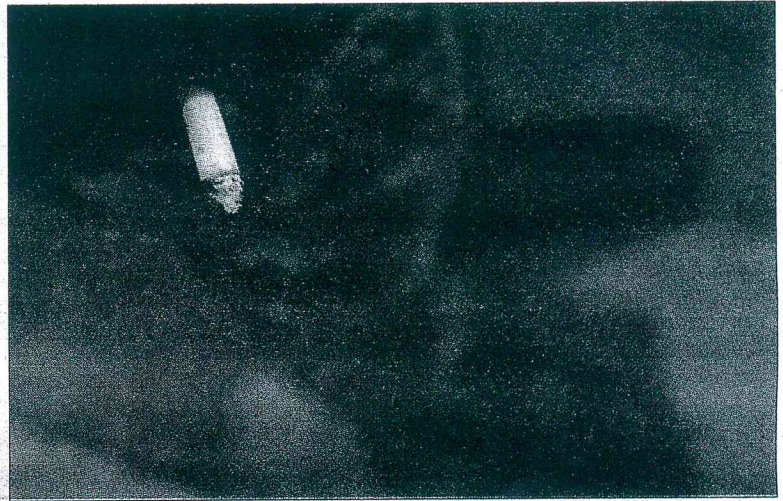
In many respects, to walk into many VA centers today is to walk into the 1950s, as staffers push paper amid crowded waiting rooms and facilities in disrepair.

VA essentially has become a stodgy federal jobs program that is in deep need of new talent with modern skill sets and the cutting-edge technology to do their jobs swiftly and effectively. The need for investment in IT updates, in particular, has long been critical and today is more dire than ever.

Admittedly, with just two years until the next presidential election, anyone who replaces Shinseki at this juncture would be a lame duck in that role, with an expectation that the incoming administration would want to appoint a new slate of cabinet-level officials.

Still, the rapidly growing wave of anger over the wait list scandal has made it painfully clear that allowing the status quo at VA to remain intact is unacceptable.

The time for change at VA is now.



GREG BAKER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A retired Army colonel and head of a group that represents U.S. Public Health Service officers expressed his organization's support for Navy Secretary Ray Mabus' push to end Navy tobacco sales.

BACKING TOBACCO BAN

On May 9, the Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service and the PHS Commissioned Officers Foundation for the Advancement of Public Health sent a letter to Navy Secretary Ray Mabus commending his effort to combat tobacco use among sailors and Marines, as reported in recent issues of Navy Times ["Tobacco sales may end on Navy, Marine bases," April 7; "Lawmakers move to block restrictions on tobacco sales," May 19].

We offered the following thoughts in our letter to the secretary:

- A higher percentage of service members smoke (32 percent) than do civilians (20 percent).
- Exchanges sell tobacco products at a significant discount from civilian retail, despite a Defense Department directive which restricts such discounts
- Eliminating the sale of discounted tobacco products would almost certainly reduce tobacco use among service members.
- Service members who smoke are less fit than those who do not.
- Service members who smoke take longer to recover from wounds than those who do not.
- Tobacco use costs the Defense Department hundreds of millions of dollars per year.

The PHS went tobacco-free-uniform as of Jan. 21 for its commissioned officers. We are not recommending that the Defense Department do the same, but we do believe that eliminating the sale of tobacco products from exchanges and ship's stores is the right thing to do for the health and well-being of service members.

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TRICARE WARNING

Last October, my wife was plucked out of Tricare Prime. We had to get civilian insurance.

But recently, she was offered an opportunity to enroll in Prime again. The excitement was short-lived when we found out that our providers, known as primary care managers, or PCMs, were not allowed to re-enroll.

So, the good news is, you can re-join Tricare. The bad news is, you can't see any of your old Tricare doctors.

So much for "if you like your doctors, you can keep 'em."

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