The Honorable David J. Shulkin, M.D.
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave. N.W., Room 1063B
Washington, D.C. 20420

March 15, 2018

Dear Secretary Shulkin:

We write to express concern regarding veterans’ access to cochlear implants (CI), a hearing technology for individuals with moderate to profound hearing loss who do not benefit sufficiently from traditional hearing aids. Although the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is diligent about the selection of experienced, highly-skilled clinicians to examine veterans, the VHA lags behind the general hearing health community in referring candidates for cochlear implantation. This has created a major coverage gap in cochlear implantation between veterans receiving service in the VHA and those outside the VHA system.

In 2014, more than 933,000 veterans received disability compensation for hearing loss, demonstrating the widespread nature of this condition. In 2016, an estimated 378,000 veterans received hearing aid care from the VHA.

Using standard measures of calculating possible candidacy, an estimated five percent of the hearing aid user population among veterans would benefit from a cochlear implant, a total of nearly 19,000 veteran candidates. However, in 2016, only 477 veterans received a cochlear implant in the VHA system—meaning that just 2.5 percent of likely be candidates actually received one. Using this same estimation method for those in the general hearing health population, 10.2 percent of eligible patients received a cochlear implant in the United States in 2016. Those receiving hearing care services from the VHA were considerably less likely to receive appropriate care for their level of hearing loss.

Combat veterans are at severe risk of developing hearing loss. Studies have shown about 1 in 3 veterans who have served in a combat zone return with measurable hearing loss, which can worsen over time. Veterans stand to substantially benefit from appropriate hearing technologies. If their hearing loss has reached the profound level, they may benefit from cochlear implants, which can not only improve the hearing ability of veterans, but are also cost-effective and improve quality of life.
Cochlear implantation consistently ranks among the most cost-effective medical procedures ever reported not only for children, but also for adults, including individuals’ age 50-80 years. With respect to health outcomes, a study found significant improvements in adult health in five areas post cochlear implantation: vitality; physical, mental and emotional health; and social function.

However, barriers within the VHA appear to be impacting veterans’ access to cochlear implants. While most VHA audiologists are trained to fit hearing aids and provide assistive devices, many are unfamiliar with current CI candidacy testing and outcomes. The VHA’s own candidacy protocols differ from those used by most cochlear implant clinicians in 2018. Cochlear implant clinicians outside of the VHA system have reported seeing veterans who were not counseled about their CI candidacy because of age or their particular type of hearing loss. Neither are valid reasons for not referring veterans who may benefit from a cochlear implant. Other access concerns relate to distances veterans must travel to for care and long wait times for the surgery given limited operating room availability.

Given the significant differences reported in access to cochlear implants, we request that you instruct the VHA to utilize contemporary cochlear implant candidacy methodology and conduct staff training to align the VHA with current practices regarding cochlear implantation. These practices will help improve access to important, cost-effective hearing technologies like cochlear implants for veterans with hearing loss. Please respond detailing the steps you plan to take to resolve this disparity and ensure veterans are receiving the hearing care they deserve.

We appreciate your attention to this important issue and look forward to a timely response.

Sincerely,

David B. McKinley, P.E.
Member of Congress

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