

"In the dental clinic at the John Cochran VA Medical Center in St. Louis, our federal government is letting U.S. veterans down. The VA says 1,812 patients at the dental clinic in May were exposed to instruments that were improperly cleaned and sterilized by the staff and could have carried serious transmittable diseases to veterans. This is an unacceptable breach of protocol, and a real failure to serve the men and women of our area who have earned the best care and benefits our nation can provide.

All in all, too many veterans are falling through the cracks at VA. One veteran falling through the cracks is too many. Some are treated unfairly by a benefit claims process that doesn't recognize exposure to Agent Orange from their service in Vietnam. Others, suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders, are dismissed from the VA without getting the care they need. Still more veterans experience problems when scheduling appointments to see the doctors charged with treating them completely and efficiently.

Congress has boosted funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs to improve the medical services and to eliminate the backlog of benefits claims. Yet, incidents like those at John Cochran VA Medical Center persist, and veterans are still waiting years to hear the response of the VA to their claims of combat-related injuries and diseases.

The VA needs a return to basics. They need to be reminded just who they are serving. These are Americans who, 65 years ago, won World War II. These are patriots who left their homes for the jungles of Vietnam or a battle formation in the Pacific Fleet off the shores of Korea. These are our sons and daughters who fought in the 120 degree heat of Iraq and the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan. These are willing servicemembers who risked life and limb for our freedoms to win the Cold War and who fought for our nation around the world under the banner of our American flag.

They do not deserve, in the phase of their lives in which it is our responsibility to care for them, to be exposed to hepatitis or HIV at a VA dental clinic. Words can't express how angry that makes me.

Instead of results, a solution to the problem, and a full-court press from the VA in response to the situation in St. Louis (which reaches to veterans living in the Eighth Congressional District), we are getting the runaround. I've heard from patients that the facility is dirty, that no one there is accountable, and that veterans bear the consequences of this indifference. Unacceptable.

Now, there is evidence that a staff member was fired from John Cochran for revealing that sanitation protocols were not being followed. If this is true - it is the final straw. A congressional committee is investigating this incident and held a hearing in St. Louis, and an independent board from the VA will conduct its own review of what happened there. When those actions are complete, I will ask the VA for a special commission to return this facility to the high standards the VA should keep.

In the meantime, ANY veteran in our congressional district who has encountered a problem getting the care they need from the VA should contact a member of my staff and we will start

working on their behalf immediately. My staff and I deal with hundreds of cases each year, some easy to resolve and some tough, but we will do whatever it takes to get answers when the VA isn't doing its job."