



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
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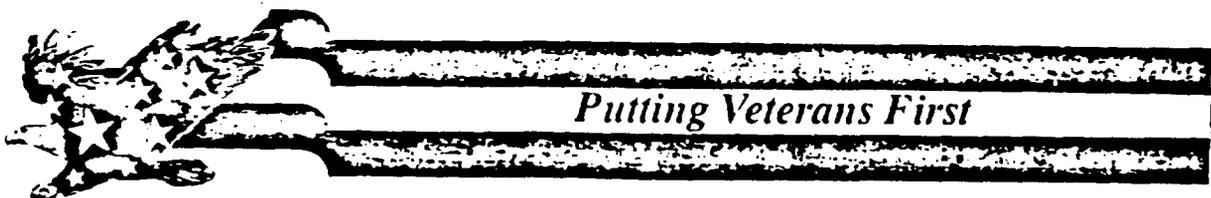
TO ALL VA MEDICAL CENTER DIRECTORS:

In response to recent reports that government-sponsored research involving radioactive materials may have been conducted in an inappropriate manner many years ago, I have pledged to our veterans and the American people that the Department of Veterans Affairs will commence a full and comprehensive review of its nuclear medicine activities and records. The attached directive from the Acting Under Secretary for Health provides instructions for executing the preliminary phase of this inquiry.

Underscoring my commitment is the belief I hold, and which I trust you share, that we must be seen as acting in the total best interests of anyone who has ever been treated or examined at a VA facility. Our review must be thorough, it must be accurate and it must be energetic. If our efforts are seen as anything less than a determined search for the truth, we not only will have failed those who placed their trust in us, but squandered this important opportunity to demonstrate our compassion and concern.

I recognize this task impacts on the daily pressures of our health-care mission and that it comes as an unexpected administrative burden. Nevertheless, we must respond not only to the public's expectations, but because it is the right and moral thing to do. Let us all work together so that the results of this review reflect our total acceptance of those principles.


Jesse Brown



**STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE JESSE BROWN
SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

January 25, 1994

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the steps we are taking to determine if inappropriate radiation-related experiments have ever occurred at any facilities for which the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has responsibility. In response to recent reports that government-sponsored experiments involving radioactive materials may have been conducted in an inappropriate manner many years ago, I have pledged to veterans, their families and the American people that VA will initiate a full and comprehensive review of its activities and records. At my direction, a review to assess the conduct of human radiation experiments research at any VA facility is now underway. If evidence indicates subsequently that any abuses associated with radiation experiments have occurred, VA is fully prepared to take whatever action is necessary to address the possible health care and other needs of veterans who may have suffered adversely from the effects of such experimentation.

I wish to assure you at the outset that every possible action is now being taken by VA, in concert with other concerned Federal Departments and Agencies including, among others, the Department of Energy, Department of Defense, Health and Human

Services and NASA, to determine the nature, location and possible effects of radiation-related experimentation. A special Human Radiation Interagency Working Group has been established by the President to provide for a coordinated review by all concerned Federal Departments and Agencies, of all human radiation experiments conducted since 1944 and to assess all radiation experiments that involved the intentional exposure of individuals to radioactive substances or the intentional releases of radiation into the environment that were designed to test human health effects or the extent of human exposure to ionizing radiation. VA will be a full participant in the activities of this Working Group and we will cooperate fully with all interested agencies and Congress in addressing this issue.

During the early years of the Nuclear Age, VA was a pioneer in nuclear medicine and a great deal of research, with major benefits for patient care, was carried out in VA facilities using radioisotopes. A review of centrally held research and nuclear medicine records has revealed no information on specific research projects, protocols, or human subjects. Therefore, I found it necessary to require each VA medical center to conduct a search of its research and other files to determine if that information exists locally. Attached to my testimony are copies of the documents directing this undertaking. All VA facilities are now engaged in this effort. Our review includes any research that VA conducted in conjunction with our affiliated medical schools and any research that VA, as some documentation indicates, contracted out to other entities. We will be compiling and analyzing their reports as received in order to ascertain the level of VA participation in any human-related radiation experiments. We expect to complete an initial review by the end of the month.

As part of our outreach to veterans, we have asked the veterans service organizations to help us locate veterans who might have been subjects of these

experiments. We have also announced a toll-free line (1-800-827-1000) for veterans to contact us if they have concerns about their possible participation.

Mr. Chairman, we share your concern for the protection of human subjects in any research, radiation-related or otherwise. Clinical research directed toward improvement in disease prevention, diagnosis and treatment often requires the participation of patients in carefully designed studies. It is VA policy, and this policy is rigorously enforced, that all participants in research studies be fully informed, consenting subjects and that they must be protected by all legal and ethical safeguards pertaining to human subject research. In addition to human rights reviews conducted at local VA medical centers, there are two additional reviews undertaken routinely as part of the national VA peer review process involving any proposed human research. These reviews are designed to resolve any potential problems and assure compliance of the proposed research with appropriate human rights standards before any research is undertaken. VA was a key player in the development of current federal policies in this area. We believe that our regulations and procedures meet appropriate ethical, scientific and medical standards, and still permit us to maintain an excellent program of research.

Mr. Chairman, as I previously noted, VA has led the way in the development of modern nuclear medicine discipline. Historical documents show that in 1947 VA established a program employing radioisotopes for the purpose of medical research, clinical diagnosis and medical treatment of patients. VA medical centers were required to comply fully with standards established by the Atomic Energy Commission for health protection of patients receiving isotopes as well as for individuals working with them, and we are aware of nothing to indicate that these standards were not strictly observed from the beginning. By December 31, 1953, there were 33 radioisotope units either established or in the process of activation in VA hospitals. By 1958, the number had

risen to 48. VA pioneered the medical use of radioisotopes and for many years VA researchers led the field in such research in this country.

All projects were to be reviewed at the local level by a Radioisotope Committee that included individuals from outside the VA and also had access to one of three radiation experts of international stature appointed by the then Chief Medical Director to serve as consultants to a Central Advisory Committee and to individual hospital programs. Research projects were not reviewed at the Central Office level until the 1960s. A separate review by a human subjects committee probably did not occur at the time of the early studies as that did not become a practice until about 1962. However, currently we have no evidence to suggest that VA ever engaged in radioisotope studies that were not medically sound and designed to benefit patients.

VA also had an "Atomic Medicine Division." According to a 1952 Bulletin of the Committee on Veterans' Medical Problems, which was a component of the National Academy of Sciences, in 1947, VA's Chief Medical Director became deeply concerned about the problems that atomic energy might create for the Veterans Administration due to the fact that the Armed Services were so actively engaged in matters of atomic energy. The Director, out of concern for problems VA might have in connection with alleged service-connected disability claims, classified the existence of VA's Atomic Medicine Division as "confidential." Mr. Chairman, it is extremely upsetting to me that VA apparently did not reveal for an undetermined length of time the existence of this Atomic Medicine Division, and I have ordered a thorough review of the records to attempt to piece together why this was done: what, if any, secret activities it engaged in; and the consequences of those activities.

We do know that one purpose of the Atomic Medicine Program was to teach techniques of nuclear preparedness to the nation. VA was named the lead agency in that endeavor. The employment of radiation scientists allowed VA to conduct this training mission in connection with the Civil Defense program and at the same time launch an important pioneering program on the medical use of isotopes. Information on VA's role in civilian defense is outlined in a December 15, 1950, "Brief of Training Plan, U.S. Veterans Administration: Medical Aspects of Atomic Warfare, Medical Aspects of Radiological Defense, Radiological Defense (Monitors)."

At the local VA hospital level, radiation specialists held courses in their communities on atomic preparedness and taught fire and police personnel how to use radiation monitoring devices like the Geiger counter. The Atomic Medicine Program also produced a Training Guide for a Course in Radiobiological Defense that was used extensively in the Civil Defense program of the 1950s.

Mr. Chairman, as you can see, this is a very complex issue made more difficult to some degree by the passage of time. However, let me again assure you that I will leave no stone unturned in our review of any VA involvement in the radiation-related experiments in question. Should the final evidence indicate that there were radiation-related experiments detrimental to the health and welfare of veterans, we will take the necessary action to provide for their care as well as addressing any other concerns they may have.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks. I will be glad to answer any questions which you or Members of this committee may have.