

DCs seek primary care status at VA

A House bill would name chiropractors as primary care providers in the VA health system. But opposition may lead to a study.

Jay Greene

AMNEWS STAFF

UNDER PROVISIONS OF A BILL APPROVED BY THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES last month, chiropractors would be designated as primary care providers in the Dept. of Veterans Affairs health care system. Physicians also would receive training on the benefits of referring patients for chiropractic services.

The chiropractic provisions of the

bill, the "Disabled Veterans Service Dog and Health Care Improvement Act of 2001," have stimulated a letter-writing campaign to Congress from more than 3,600 family physicians voicing opposition, said the American Academy of Family Physicians.

Besides the AAFP, groups opposing the chiropractic provisions of HB 2792 include the AMA, the American Osteopathic Assn. and the American Assn. of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine. At least two veterans groups — Vietnam Veterans of America and Disabled American Veterans — also oppose the chiropractic provisions of the bill, as do the White House and the VA. Supporting the provisions are three chiropractic groups led by the

American Chiropractic Assn.

The bill also calls for requiring service dogs to be provided to veterans with disabilities, mandating additional specialized treatment for veterans, and creating a nursing commission to address an aging veterans population.

At press time, the Senate has asked the House in conference committee to either remove the chiropractic provisions or fund a pilot study at six to 15 VA sites. The House bill calls for a five-year implementation plan with 30 hospitals added each year until all 170 VA medical centers provide the mandated chiropractic benefits. A report by the Congressional Budget Office estimates that hiring chiropractors for

Continued on next page

OUT OF THE RUBBLE

Practice rebuilds, recovers, moves on

AVRAM NEMETZ, MD, DIDN'T SEE any patients at Affiliated Physician's small midtown Manhattan office on Sept. 12. He had few medical records or data to work with, either.

Most of his patients were too jarred by the previous day's attack on the World Trade Center to even think about coming in for a corporate physical. And most of his practice's records were destroyed when Five World Trade Center, where Affiliated's main office was located, collapsed.

In the days that followed, Dr. Nemetz, Affiliated's medical director for 10 years, and his colleagues faced the daunting task of rebuilding the practice, which provides corporate medical services such as physicals, flu shots and urgent care.

"It's an enormous task to face, but it's what we have to do," he said.

Dr. Nemetz estimated, based on



PHOTO BY BRUCE GAINES

AVRAM NEMETZ, MD, near his midtown New York City office.

recognizing names in the lists of those missing, that about 200 of his patients were killed in the attack. About 70% of Affiliated's corporate clients, including Cantor Fitzgerald, a bond trading firm that lost nearly all of its

Continued on next page

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two other full-time physicians, the practice's chief operating officer and about 40 other health care workers and office staff — had to painstakingly piece together the practice's patient and client list, rebuild medical records, purchase new computers and software, and quickly turn space in the practice's small midtown office into extra examining rooms and work cubicles.

Adding to the challenge was the fact that the practice did not keep off-site backups of its data or medical records, said Affiliated COO Phillip Villacci.

"We expected the computers to go down, but never the building."

Smoke and chaos

THOUGHTS OF REBUILDING WERE far from Dr. Nemetz's mind on Sept. 11. When he first heard the muffled boom and the sound of breaking glass, he knew instantly there had been an explosion. He had heard the same sounds during the 1993 bomb

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Phillip Villacci, chief operating officer

blast in the World Trade Center's underground parking garage.

At first, Dr. Nemetz said, he was hopeful that this time it wasn't as bad as it had been eight years ago, but his optimism faded as soon as he exited his building, located northeast of tower one, the first hit by a hijacked jet.

The courtyard was covered with debris, recalled Dr. Nemetz, and "millions of sheets of paper were fluttering down."

As he was moving away from the towers, he heard a "a tremendous explosion" overhead, as the second plane slammed into the World Trade Center's south tower.

Dr. Nemetz dashed away from the barrage of debris and found himself standing on Broadway. He was overwhelmed by the sight of a "sea of humanity" frantically running away from the towers.

rebounds, recovers, moves on

"I just sat down on the sidewalk and cried."

As Dr. Nemetz later watched the news at home, he thought about his patients. "I saw 25 patients a day for 10 years down there. So I knew I had lost a large number of patients."

Rising from the ashes

THE NEXT DAY DR. NEMETZ AND his colleagues began the challenge of getting the practice up and running at its satellite office.

Despite the loss of most of the practice's records, they still had a little data. A Zip drive at the midtown office contained a year-old list of clients. Dr. Nemetz had a Palm Pilot at home with the names of some of the group's clients. Villacci contacted the practice's accounting firm, located about 30 miles outside of New York, and asked for a list of payment vouchers.

Affiliated staff pieced all this together and reconstructed the client and patient list, sent out letters and called patients, letting them know that the practice's midtown office was open.

The group also ordered new computers with voice-recognition software that allows office clerks to input information without having to type. To safeguard against future data losses, the client list was downloaded to wireless handhelds, Villacci said. The medical group also shifted to an electronic medical records system, which includes backup storage at an off-site data warehouse. This process took less than 30 days, he said.

Fortunately, the practice was well-insured with property, casualty and business interruption insurance, said Villacci, so they've been able to rebuild without worrying about how to pay for it.

Although business was slow during the first few days after the attack, it soon picked up, said Dr. Nemetz. The practice has been doing respiratory clearance examinations for people working on the recovery efforts, and the group's regular patients have started returning for corporate physicals and flu shots.

Because the practice had lost all of

thru presentations at local companies, said Villacci.

Almost all of the practice's 40 staff members are back at work, Villacci said. About 40% of the staff had been laid off immediately after the attack, but they were all rehired except for four staff members who decided not to return. All had gotten other jobs; only one said she wanted to leave New York.

It's been a stressful time for the staff, said Villacci, compounded by the cramped work space and the long hours needed to rebuild the practice's patient and client data.

The staff was quiet and subdued during the first few weeks after the attack, and people would get tears in their eyes when they talked about it, Villacci said. But he added that "the staff was great, they worked through it ... They were looking for work to do because they wanted to keep busy."

After the initial shock wore off, staff members, most of whom had been at the World Trade Center of-

Rebuilding has gone quickly. Regrouping is taking longer. "The main thing is how your life can change in an instant."

Avram Nemetz, MD

fice, began sharing stories of their experiences the day of the attack, added Dr. Nemetz, noting that such sharing has been "helpful to healing."

Emotional support from people outside the office has been helpful too, he said.

"It's that pulling together that we [Americans] have all experienced."

At this point, Affiliated is not considering a move back to a site downtown, said Villacci. However, he added, it may lease another office in New Jersey, where many of the group's clients have relocated.

Although the process of rebuilding has gone quickly, it's going to take longer for the emotional wounds to heal, said Dr. Nemetz.

"The main thing is how your life can change in an instant. ... It's a very difficult experience to integrate. Nothing in my experience prepared me for something like this." ♦