

The Honorable Debbie Dingell (D-MI)

Written Testimony

Before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Health's Legislative Hearing
September 26, 2018

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Brownley, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today. The important work of this committee is invaluable to bettering the lives of all those who have served and the families at their sides. Thank you for your tireless dedication to serving our veterans.

As you know, today's hearing includes bipartisan legislation introduced by Congressman Tim Walberg (R-MI) and I that aims to add enhanced transparency requirements at VA hospitals nationwide. Our bill, H.R. 501, the VA Transparency Enhancement Act, is a commonsense measure we can take to improve overall quality of care for veterans.

The bill simply requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to report quarterly to Congress on the number of patients who contracted an infection as a result of a surgery and report the number of surgeries cancelled or transferred by the VA. It would also require the VA to publish these reports on the Department's website for all our veterans, their families, and the public to have and understand.

While the VA currently provides completed and pending appointment data from local VA medical facilities to the public monthly, the VA does not publically release data on rates of surgical infection or cancelled or transferred surgeries. Patients have a right to see surgical infection rates and other issues impacting quality of care at VA hospitals. Improving transparency at the VA will help ensure we are meeting the quality standards we owe our veterans.

The VA Transparency Enhancement Act will also help Congress understand when, where, and why infections are happening or surgeries are cancelled so we can respond to changing conditions more effectively. Should surgical infection or cancellation rates rise at any VA hospital, Congress and the public need to know about it as soon as possible. As policymakers we need to understand whether cancelled surgeries are affecting the health of a veteran. Ensuring our veterans have access to timely, quality health care is a critical responsibility of the Congress, and this is one more important step to ensure they do.

In late 2015, my office and Congressman Walberg became aware of a contamination issue at the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System after particulate matter was observed on sterile surgical equipment. This led to surgeries for veterans being intermittently cancelled or moved to different hospitals. For many months the issue persisted putting great stress and uncertainty on our veterans who were scheduled for operations.

The staff at the Ann Arbor VA is a dedicated group of individuals. This issue came to light because they were doing their job inspecting surgical instruments and discovered the problem. To be clear, it does not appear that the contamination issue caused any infections or harm to a patient—but, for us, this remains a concern for any future cases.

Throughout this problem we remained in constant communication with Ann Arbor VA leadership. In the process, we learned that VA hospitals are not required to report on surgical infection and cancellation rates as other hospitals do.

This is not the only instance of cancelled surgeries at a VA hospital. In September 2015, the Star Tribune reported that the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center was forced to postpone and reschedule dozens of surgical procedures after an “an unidentified substance” was found in sterilizing equipment.¹

We do not want to see this happen again in Michigan or any state, which is why we took action and introduced this bill. We believe it is important that, like other hospitals, the VA be open and transparent and report the number of patients that have acquired surgical infections while receiving care at the VA, and the number of surgeries that have been canceled or moved to another hospital.

The number one priority for all of us is to ensure that veterans receive the highest quality health care. By increasing transparency we can prevent the worst scenarios for our veterans and identify problematic VA hospitals sooner. Our responsibility as Members of Congress is to be a voice and advocate for veterans all across this country, and serve our veterans as well as they have served us.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify before this committee on legislation that will improve VA transparency and patient care for all our veterans. We urge every member of the committee to support this legislation and we stand ready to work with you in any way to move this bipartisan bill out of this committee for consideration on the House floor. At this time, I look forward to answering any questions the committee may have.

¹ Brunswick, Mark, “Minneapolis VA shuts down surgeries over unidentified substance,” Star Tribune, September 23, 2015, <http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-va-hospital-shuts-down-surgeries-after-a-substance-is-found-in-sterilization-equipment/328878601/>