

Controlling High Blood Pressure: Making a Difference at the VA

Rural America is home to roughly one quarter of the U.S. population. Yet healthcare access often falls behind that of more urban areas.

Here in the mountainous state of West Virginia, steps are being taken to help overcome that obstacle.

This particular effort is being spearheaded by the Louis A. Johnson Veterans Administration Hospital in Clarksburg, West Virginia.

Veteran, Registered Nurse and VA Care Coordinator Frank Ketterman says that in a state like West Virginia, helping veterans and their families get better health screenings is a benefit to a large percentage of the state's population.

“One out of seven West Virginians are veterans, which is the highest within the United States per capita. And out of those veterans that are registered with the VA, almost two-thirds of them have a hypertension associated illness.”

Miles away from the hospital, in the small community of New Martinsville, a large medical RV is pulling into town.

It is the Rural Health Care Mobile Clinic, one of three the VA operates around the country.

“The mobile health unit's goal primarily is to improve access to veterans.”

Dr. Sidney Jackson, mobile clinic doctor, and Director of the Rural Mobile Health Care Program, says they treat more than just hypertension.

“We have various programs especially focused on hypertension and those diseases that surround it, diabetes, coronary artery disease, hyperlipidemia and adjusting medications for outcome-based results.”

Local veteran Tim Doty served in Viet Nam in 1967. After his service, Tim didn't take advantage of the VAs medical benefits, until 2003. That's when he discovered the Mobile Health Clinic.

“They took blood tests and checked me out in their mobile unit which I thought was fantastic. And about three days later they called me and they said, you've got some problems, with your hypertension.”

Tim Doty's home is in the middle of a 6200 acre farm about a forty-five minute drive from where the Mobile Clinic came on this day.

But he believes the medical care he gets is worth the trip.

“One doctor told me I could cut back a lot on red meat and dairy products which is about 3/4th of my diet. But I'm, pretty open minded about my diet, I eat more of the vegetables you know and that's good for you.”

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“So you give them the facts and the information that they need, the process that they need to follow in order to accomplish something and the results of that. Then they feel more comfortable about moving into those results and they will begin to take steps and do.”

“I use my home health nurse and report my blood pressure and answer questions every day.”

Ron Cunningham was a Supply Sergeant for 165th Combat Aviation Group in Viet Nam.

The home health nurse program Ron refers to is part of the VA Telemedicine program.

Here, patients use a device to take their own blood pressure from home every day.

The results are sent by phone line to the VA hospital in Clarksburg, where RN, Frank Ketterman, keeps a detailed record of Ron's blood pressure readings.

“We analyze the data and look for trends in the data or alerts that let us know that something's changed or altered from their baseline. And this veteran is Mr. Ronald Cunningham. And, some of his initial readings of his blood pressure were significantly higher, actually 160 over 100, and as you can see here currently, they're 140 over 80 and 140 over 90. So you can definitely see the benefits of the program that he's been on as we've adjusted his medication that he's taking.”

A recent study that was done in association with the American Heart Association shows that home blood pressure monitoring has definite benefits for managing high blood pressure.

With blood pressure monitors and tools that connected patients and clinicians using the internet, the study showed that using this technology improved patients' ability to monitor and control their blood pressure issues.