The Virtue of Patients: Veterans’ Fatal Wait

### History of the VA
- 1917: Support given for Plymouth Colony soldiers
- 1920: Continental Congress provided pensions for soldiers
- 1921: The first VA medical facility opened
- 1947: Veteran care expanded to include insurance, disability compensation, and vocational rehabilitation
- 1950: Veterans benefits managed by three separate Federal agencies

### Groundwork for Scandal
- Increasing veteran population
- Increasing demand for physical and mental health services
  - Some VA physician’s care for approximately 1,000 patients
- Poor infrastructure
  - In the early 2000’s, Kenneth Keller administrated bureaucracy that resulted from poor data entry
- Inefficient processes
  - Less time spent on fewer patients and timely
- As a result, corruption at the local level could be hidden from those at the top

### Scandal Warning Signs
- Since 2003, all instances of scheduling issues were reported
  - 2004: Vet was sent to all VA medical centers administering 12 unethical practices being used to cover up treatment delays
  - 2010: Audit revealed
    - No evidence of scheduling was found
    - Wait times were being falsified
  - 2012: Another memo was sent regarding treatment delays and falsified documentation

### Secret Wait List Explanation
- Scheduler would enter patient information into the system
- Then take a screen shot and print a hard copy of the info
- The electronic record would then be deleted
- Information from the hard copy would be entered into a separate, secret electronic file, then the hard copy would be shredded
- Patients would be removed from the secret list onto the official list only after their appointment was 14 days away

### Scandal Breadth
- In Phoenix
  - Thousands of veterans were on the secret wait list
  - At least 42 veterans died while waiting for care, none of whom were on the secret list
- Across the nation
  - Hundreds of patients were waiting at least two months for care
- One VA facility was waiting longer than one day
- All VA facilities were investigated

### Why all the deceit?
- VA facilities were trying to meet the 14-day appointment goal established by Shinseki during his overhaul of the VA
- Leaders of facilities that met this goal were rewarded
  - 70% of VA facility managers were satisfied with the performance of these managers received ratings of at least “fully meet expectations”
- Sharon intermitt (Phoenix) received an $8,500 bonus in 2013

### Chronology of Events
- 2013: Charles F. Bolden Jr. is appointed as the Veterans Affairs director
  - The Veterans Affairs Department is formed
- 2014: Robert McDonald is appointed as the Veterans Affairs Secretary
- 2014: Veterans Health Administration budget alcaned $17 billion
- 2014: Veterans Health Administration employees exceed 300,000
- 2015: Veterans Health Administration services are expanded to include mental health treatment

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1. Source: [Veterans Affairs](https://www.va.gov)
5. Source: [The Los Angeles Times](https://www.latimes.com)
Chronology of Events Continued

- May 2014: Robert Petzel resigned
- July 2014: Senate confirmed Robert McDonald as new VA secretary
- June 2014: OIG report released: 113,000 veterans died as a result of VA delays

Chronology of Events Continued

- August 2014: Inspector General released report saying VA was at fault for deaths
- September 2014: Secretary McDonald announced VA will change
- November 2014: Secretary McDonald announced MyVA, the largest reorganization of VA ever to create

Initial VA Response

- Sharon Helman: Phoenix VA Director
  - Interview with CNN: she claimed no knowledge of secret list
  - Email documentation introducing title was found
  - Refused any interviews after being put on administrative leave
- Erik Shinseki: VA Secretary
  - One interview with CBS News in March
  - One interview with Military Times in May
  - Overall: silence
  - No other interviews with media were given

Initial Public Response

- President Obama: “If these allegations prove to be true, it is disgraceful and will not tolerate it—period.”
- Democrat Sen. Mark Udall: VA is “suffering from an atmosphere of public leadership and it is founded as a result.”
- Republican Sen. John McCain: “This has created in our veteran community a crisis of confidence toward the VA.”
- Social Media: #SaveOurVets #VetsChange #VAurge

Initial Public Response Continued

- VA Deputy Director Bryan Goblick: “The allegations are simply unfounded and the VA does not believe that any veteran died as a result of VA care, which is unacceptable.”
- National Service Director National Coordinator Michael E. “…we will do everything we can to support and protect our veterans and their loved ones.”
- Secretary Robert McDonald: “We will get to the bottom of this and there’s not a single person who can say that we will not find the truth and that the truth will come out.”

Initial Media Response

- Extremely critical headlines
  - Veterans’ care at VA hospitals: “The VA care and service is unacceptable.”
  - VA scandal: “A VA doctor was charged with $90,000 in fraud.”

VA Change

- The Senate confirmed Robert McDonald as the new secretary of the VA in July 2014.
- McDonald’s appointment marked a major shift in how the VA communicated about the scandal.

McDonald’s Actions

- Nationwide (as of November 2014):
  - 216,300 veterans contacted to get them off the waiting list, which decreased in size by 28%
  - 375,000 referrals made to private doctors
  - Increased performance reviews
  - Every facility had a face-to-face audit and at least one town hall meeting
  - MyVA: huge reorganization of VA with focus on customer service and public-private partnerships

McDonald’s Communication

- First: admission of guilt
  - Open letter to veterans, media interviews
- Second: immediate action
  - MyVA: #SaveOurVets, public appearances at veteran meetings, etc.
- Third: hands on research
  - Call me Bob, cell phone number, town hall meetings, site visits
- Fourth: long-term solutions
Discussion Questions

What communication strategy can be used to respond to a crisis when you don’t have all the facts or if you are legally obligated to withhold information from the public?

In today’s age of expected immediacy, how could the VA keep up with the public/media’s timetable and communicate credible change in its organization when true, effective change often takes a great deal of time?

If your company knows of an internal issue, should it be proactive and disclose the information to the public, or wait until the media picks up the story and then react?

Discussion Questions

How could the VA utilize public relations to work with veterans to move past the scheduling scandal, even though many veterans are angry with the VA?

What internal communication could the VA utilize to improve its organizational culture?

Veterans are diverse. They are men and women, young and old, and from all walks of life. What are some things hospitals, medical facilities, and organizations can do to better support veterans?

There is an attempt by the VA to manage the scheduling scandal, but what should the VA do to truly overcome the crisis?

Discussion Questions

Do Secretary McDonald’s actions seem sincere, or are they just a public relations scheme? Why or why not? If they don’t seem sincere, what could he do to improve?

Should Secretary McDonald be in the face of the new VA? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this “fought in shining armor” approach?

Is there a point where an organization has made too many mistakes and cannot recover its public image or the trust of its stakeholders?

Page Principles

Tell the truth.

This is not always easy, especially when you don’t have all the facts. This is exactly what happened with Secretary Shinkai as the scheduling scandal broke. He refused to take any responsibility for what had happened, and the public was left wondering what had really happened. The VA had no choice but to come clean and tell the truth.

Secretary McDonald took a different approach. He may not have known all of the facts, but he knew enough to know that the VA had something to hide.

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How could Secretary McDonald use public relations to work with veterans to move past the scheduling scandal, even though many veterans are angry with the VA?

What internal communication could Secretary McDonald utilize to improve its organizational culture?

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Prove it with action.

When they aren’t in their office or a boardroom, leaders of organizations are often seen on television or in commercials, but do they make good on what they promise? In today’s age of expected immediacy, the public expects leaders to deliver.

Although McDonald did in fact show his commitment to the VA, he also showed his commitment to the company as a whole. His decision to keep the public informed and involved was key in rebuilding the VA’s reputation.

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Listen to the customer.

Secretary McDonald was the first VA leader to view veterans as customers. He wanted to know what they had to say and put their needs first. He also made it a point to speak to anyone who wanted to. Each person has a unique story, and McDonald understood the importance of hearing them.

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Manage for tomorrow.

The VA scheduling scandal did not happen quickly. It was a result of years of temporary fixes and changing priorities. There was a problem and too many veterans and too much time had passed. This was a perfect example of why organizations need to have a clear vision and a plan for the future.

Secretary McDonald took a different approach. He saw the crisis as an opportunity to build a better VA.

Discussion Questions

How could McDonald use public relations to work with veterans to move past the scheduling scandal, even though many veterans are angry with the VA?

What internal communication could McDonald utilize to improve its organizational culture?

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REMAIN CALM, PATIENT, AND GOOD-HUMORED.

This is a lesson all health professionals understand. Imagine a nurse confronted with a flood of patients in the emergency room after a major accident. There is plenty of panic in the room; the nurse must be the source of calm for those who need it. Without a clear head, the nurse could not do a good job. This is exactly how public relations practitioners must act in times of crisis. Although Secretary Shinseki might have been a little too patient, there is something to be said for his avoidance of rash action and not throwing any of his staff under the bus.