

Preserve Safe Care for Veterans *Strike Anesthesia Provisions from VHA Nursing Handbook*

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Office of Nursing Services (ONS) has proposed a new policy document known as the "VHA Nursing Handbook." The document seeks to change how anesthesia care is delivered to our nation's Veterans receiving care in Veterans Health Administration (VHA) health care facilities. Currently, the document is under review at VA with the title "Advance Practice Registered Nurses" before it is released to the Federal Register for public comments.

The document's most contentious provision seeks to abandon physician-led, team-based surgical anesthesia care, the current consensus model of care in VA, and replace it with a nurse-only model of care. The Handbook would mandate every VA facility operate with "independent" nurse practice of anesthesia, regardless of state law, putting Veterans' health and lives at risk. The VA's own surgical anesthesia experts, the VA Chiefs of Anesthesiology, have informed VA leadership that the new policy **"would directly compromise patient safety and limit our ability to provide quality care to Veterans."** While VA's rationale for moving toward nurse-only models of care is to expand the number of providers available to provide primary care for Veterans, there is no shortage of physician anesthesiologists or nurse anesthetists in VA.

A bipartisan group of more than 90 Congressional representatives and senators contacted VA to express concerns about the negative impact of the proposed VHA Nursing Handbook on patient safety.

Similarly, prominent national Veterans' organizations have expressed concerns to VA leadership about the implications of the Nursing Handbook for care to Veterans. In a letter to VA, AMVETS noted that the policy change **"would fundamentally, and we feel adversely, impact the delivery of care to veterans."** The Association of the U.S. Navy (AUSN) wrote that **"We find this proposed shift from the current guidelines unnecessary and worrisome for our nation's Veteran community."** The National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS) wrote in regards to the proposal to express their **"strong concern to the possible reduction in standards of anesthesia delivery in surgery at Veterans Administration medical facilities."**

KEY POINTS:

- VA's Office of Nursing Services (ONS) is advancing a new policy that would lower the standard of care for Veterans receiving anesthesia care in VA facilities by abandoning VA's proven model of physician-led, team-based surgical anesthesia care, replacing it with a nurse-only model of care.
- VA patients have complex medical conditions that pose a heightened risk of complications during surgery. The team-based model of care ensures that they will have access to a physician anesthesiologist if an emergency or complication occurs.
- Independent studies inform policy makers of better outcomes when physicians are involved in anesthesia.
- There is no shortage of physician anesthesiologists or nurse anesthetists in VA, according to the 2015 Mission Critical Occupations Report and the September 2015 VA OIG Staffing Shortage report.
- Internal and external Veterans' health stakeholders, including VA's own anesthesia experts, the VA Chiefs of Anesthesiology, and Veterans' organizations, have expressed concerns to the highest leadership levels of VA about the proposed policy change. A bipartisan group of more than 90 lawmakers contacted VA with concerns about how the proposed VHA Nursing Handbook could negatively impact patient safety.
- Find more information about this issue at asahq.org/SafeVACare.

CONGRESSIONAL REQUEST:

To ensure that the health and lives of Veterans are not put at risk, urge VA to preserve physician-led, team-based surgical anesthesia care in VA medical facilities by joining the Congressional sign-on letter or writing an individual letter to VA.



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