



## VA Wrongly Says Vets Have Fatal Disease

The Veterans Affairs Department has mistakenly told some veterans that they have ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, the Associated Press reported on August 24. This is no small misdiagnosis; the disease is usually fatal within five years.

VA spokeswoman Katie Roberts says that letters about disability benefits were mailed to 1,864 veterans with ALS. According to Roberts, a "small number" of veterans have informed the VA that they received the letters in error.



But the National Gulf War Resource Center says that 2,500 letters were sent, and almost half were sent to veterans who don't have ALS. The Resource Center says at least 1,200 veterans were wrongly sent the letter, while Roberts said fewer than 10 people have told the VA about receiving a letter in error. Jim Bunker, president of the Resource Center, said his group stands by its numbers.

The Gulf War veterans group stated that those who received the letters by mistake have undiagnosed neurological disorders. This led some to take the news very hard, and to subject themselves to painful, expensive tests to try to get a second opinion. Former Air Force reservist Gale Reid received the VA letter and immediately put herself through the tests in order to have some hope. Five days later, she found out it was all a mistake.

"I've been through a week of hell, emotionally, physically and financially," Reid said, and she is not alone. Former Army Sergeant Samuel Hargrove broke into tears upon reading his letter. "I can't even describe the intensity of my feelings," the father of two said. "With so many health issues that I already have, I didn't know how to approach my family with the news." Initially he didn't break the news to them, but talked with other veterans at the Resource Center and online. This was how he discovered the mistake, and now he is very angry.

Denise Nichols, vice president of the Resource Center, said similarly upset veterans in Alabama, Florida, Kansas, North Carolina, West Virginia, and Wyoming have called or e-mailed her group. "Our fear was this could push somebody over the edge," worried Nichols, "We don't want that to happen." She was referring to the fact that veterans like Hargrove, who are already overwhelmed with health concerns, could possibly take this as the last straw and opt for suicide.

Bunker stated that he spoke to a VA representative who told him the mistake resulted from a coding error related to the more than 8,000 codes used by the VA to designate illnesses of various kinds. The



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VA is now attempting to contact every person who received one of the letters in error.

Bunker's group is asking the VA to also reimburse any veteran who underwent additional testing because of the letters. Reid's tests ran around \$3,000, though she may not know for weeks how much her private insurance is going to cover.

"We are trying to work with the VA because we realize it was an error and they were trying to do something right for the people who were diagnosed with ALS," Nichols said. "Basically this was a good effort that ended badly."

Unfortunately this is the perfect description of government healthcare: "a good effort that ended badly." The VA this year has been a prime example of why Americans should resist letting government get more involved in healthcare, such as with a public insurance option.

Congress questioned the VA in June about botched colonoscopies at medical centers in Florida, Georgia, and Tennessee. As many as 10,000 veterans may have been exposed to HIV and other infections through what should have been a routine procedure. In July, the Philadelphia medical center stated that the number of veterans with cancer who received incorrect radiation treatments there had gone up to 98 out of 116 over six years. The doctor performing the treatments covered up his mistakes, and it took government officials those six years to discover them.

This is government-run healthcare: incorrect treatments doing more harm than good and impersonal letters about fatal diseases sent to the wrong patients. In other words, a good effort that will only end badly.

*Photo: AP Images*



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