



2016 LEADERSHIP IN ACTION AWARD

Presented by the Partnership for Public Service and the Leadership Alumni Board

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Finalist: Dr. Heidi Klingbeil
Department of Veterans Affairs

Achievement: Implemented a new program to reduce and eliminate the widespread use of highly addictive prescription painkillers by veterans

Until a few years ago, doctors with the Department of Veterans Affairs were routinely treating patients experiencing chronic pain with prescription opiates such as oxycodone and hydrocodone, leading to extremely high rates of addiction and fatal overdoses.

As chief of rehabilitative medicine at James J. Peters VA Medical Center in Bronx, N.Y., Dr. Heidi Klingbeil has played an integral role in a department-wide effort to reduce or eliminate the need for prescription painkillers by coming up with more comprehensive treatment approaches.

Klingbeil's initiative has included understanding and treating the cause of the pain rather than resorting to drugs to treat the symptoms.

This has involved requiring doctors to use diagnostic tools such as MRIs to identify the underlying reason for the pain, and then work with the patients to determine the best option for care. These options have included chiropractic sessions, acupuncture, yoga, physical therapy and in some cases, surgery.

Klingbeil's program has been implemented across the Northeast, which now has the lowest opiate prescription rates among VA regions in the country. In addition, as a member of the VA's National Pain Strategy Coordinating Committee, Klingbeil has helped introduce her reforms nationally.

"This country has a tendency to manage every discomfort with pain medicine," said Medical Center Director Erik Langhoff. "This type of program is counter to what anyone thought was possible. But as a public servant, Heidi knows it's important to do what is right, even if it isn't easy."

According to the VA, more than half a million veterans are on prescription opiates, representing a major problem that needs to be addressed. This also has been a nationwide problem, with the National Institute of Drug Abuse reporting that an estimated 2.1 million people in the United States suffered from substance use disorders related to prescription opioid pain relievers in 2012.

Klingbeil said her approach has meant operating against what patients have been accustomed to, and has led to additional work for doctors who have to meet more frequently with their patients. But she said the results have led to fewer prescriptions for opiates, and better outcomes and prospects for the veterans.

For example, she said many patients experiencing back pain have been found to suffer from arthritis of the spine, something most middle-aged people have, and that is exacerbated from the active lives veterans lead.

Rather than prescribing painkillers, she said, these patients now participate in “back school,” an extensive twice-a-day program in which groups of veterans come together to learn chiropractic exercises they can do at home.

Veteran George O’Dell told Stars and Stripes Magazine that lifting 100-pound Howitzer shells during the Vietnam War left him with severe neck and back pain, which he managed through heavy use of painkilling drugs.

When he came to JJP, he wanted to find a different way to manage his pain “while keeping his senses,” and was given an extensive exercise and swimming regimen that has greatly reduced his intake of opiates. “It helped me with my mind big time, because for a while I just wanted to give up,” said O’Dell.

Klingbeil said some patients still require pain medicine, but the VA hospital requires that any prescription be short-term and part of a longer-term plan for improvement. The new program, she said, is resulting in decreased use of opiates and is stopping the “bad cycle” of giving patients ever-increasing use of prescription drugs over long periods of time.

She said cases like O’Dell’s and the nationwide efforts now underway “make everything I’ve done in this area worthwhile.”