

Veterans' Advisory Board on Dose Reconstruction (VBDR)

A Special Supplement to the Ionizing Radiation Review newsletter

The Veterans' Advisory Board on Dose Reconstruction (VBDR) was formed in response to a Congressional mandate to provide guidance and independent oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claims compensation program for Atomic Veterans. The compensation program includes a "dose reconstruction" process to calculate an estimate of the radiation dose the Veteran may have received during military service.

Established by the Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs, the VBDR recommends improvements to the dose reconstruction and claims process for Veterans with cancer and other illnesses that may be related to in-service exposure to ionizing radiation.

The VBDR has four Subcommittees that address a variety of Atomic Veteran issues and concerns.

SUBCOMMITTEE 1 is responsible for reviewing and recommending improvements to the dose reconstruction process. To date, progress has been made in VA's expedited process to adjudicate claims filed by Atomic Veterans.

By implementing VBDR recommendations, DTRA's Nuclear Test Personnel Review (NTPR) Program has expedited radiation dose assessments. In October 2006, NTPR had a pending caseload of 1,400 cases, which was reduced to approximately 100 pending cases by January 2008. This reduction resulted in an average response time of 50 days or less, and no NTPR case exceeded 180 days in process time at DTRA.

Who are "Atomic Veterans"?

Veterans that were part of the 1945–1946 occupation of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, were Prisoners of War (POWs) there, or participated in U.S. above-ground nuclear testing conducted between 1945 and 1962, may have been exposed to ionizing radiation and belong to a group known as the Atomic Veterans. Atomic Veterans may have illnesses related to their exposure to radiation, and may be eligible for compensation and/or free medical care.

SUBCOMMITTEE 2 deals directly with VA to improve the process for handling Atomic Veterans claims. Subcommittee 2 conducts random audits of Atomic Veteran claims. Rarely do audits show a systemic problem and, when processing delays are found, they often appear to be necessary for thorough review of the medical issues specific to each Veteran's exposure scenario. Such instances include:

- DTRA or VA must contact the Veteran and/or the Veteran's physician;
- VA must schedule the required physicals with the Veteran;
- VA is waiting for responses from the Veterans.

Subcommittee 2 recognizes that as the Atomic Veteran population ages the claims response must be timely and accurate and therefore continues to look for time-saving measures. In February 2011, Subcommittee 2 will visit the consolidated Jackson, MS Veterans Affairs Regional Office (VARO) where all Atomic Veteran claims are handled and will review findings from the imminent Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR) report on VA radiation claims.

SUBCOMMITTEE 3 deals with quality issues with DTRA's NTPR and VA in its claims adjudication process for Atomic Veterans. Both organizations have made significant progress to ensure that claims are handled in a high-quality manner that provides Veterans with every benefit of the doubt during the claim process.

SUBCOMMITTEE 4 deals with Veteran outreach and communication programs to inform Atomic Veterans of the benefits, health care, and compensation programs available to them. Efforts include a campaign to "get the word out" to the aging Atomic Veteran community through:

- Distribution of an Atomic Veterans brochure in all VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) and clinics.
- Updates to several VA Web sites to better promote information on Atomic Veterans benefits and resources.
- Use of "social media" channels to reach children and grandchildren of Atomic Veterans.

Subcommittee 4 also works to remind all Atomic Veterans that the previous commitment to secrecy associated with the atomic testing program has been lifted—Atomic Veterans are free to discuss their participation when filing claims for service-connected disabilities.

Atomic Veterans can find out more about available compensation and benefits by calling the local VAMC or VARO. For more information about VA radiation-related programs, go to **www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/radiation**

Call **1-800-827-1000** for service-connected disability claims or general information about VA and its benefits.

The VBDR has held 10 public meetings since its inception. Veterans' input at these meetings has helped the VBDR with its deliberations and recommendations to VA and DTRA. Veterans have testified about their illnesses and problems with DTRA dose reconstructions and VA claims decisions.

While the VBDR exists to improve the overall process (and not to assist with individual claims), representatives from local VAROs have been available at VBDR meetings to provide assistance to Veterans with the handling of their claims.

The next VBDR meeting will be held in March 2011.

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Spring 2011

Public Meeting

March 11, 2011

Hilton Arlington (Ballston Metro)

950 North Stafford Street

Arlington, VA 22203

For information about the VBDR call

1-866-657-VBDR (8237) or visit **www.vbdr.org**.