

Solid Data, Solid Research: A Response From the VA Information Resource Center

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VA's research and development program conducts an array of activities that grapple with some of the most difficult challenges in health care research. VA is a world leader in research on aging, women veterans' health concerns, spinal cord injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health issues. It has improved medical care not only for veterans but also for the general population at large.

At the VA Information Resource Center (VIREC), we know firsthand the challenges researchers face in understanding and using VA information systems. We believe that many of these challenges can be minimized and mutual benefits derived by including researchers in the earliest stages of information system design.

The Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) is the information management arm of VA responsible for information resources planning, policy, software development, customer support, investigations, and acquisitions that support VA health care. In 1998, OCIO hosted a Data Summit to address data quality problems in VA's information systems. Four major areas were examined: gaps in current information systems, sources of data and problems associated with data input, data management, and data use. Participants represented most key stakeholders in VA health care. The inclusion of HSR&D in both the planning and conduct of the Data Summit program facilitated broad-based discussions of the utility of current and planned information systems to support specific priorities.

Research teams will have to work closely with information tech-

nology experts to continually refine their data needs. Initial activities that focus on identifying data gaps and creating databases will give way to efforts to enhance data collection, improve data standardization, develop new multipurpose databases, re-engineer the current data flow architecture, and develop approaches for profiling and feedback.

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HSR&D's role continues to be critical in providing support to technology and information system resources. HSR&D-funded projects have resulted in valuable references on VA databases for VA researchers. The Database Resource Guides and the Long Term Care Guides, for example, filled an important information gap. In addition, these projects forged relationships with the various information services within VA, making information about new

databases more accessible to researchers. Other HSR&D supported efforts, such as the State of the Art (SOTA) Conferences, serve to build relationships and open communication between the various information stakeholders about existing data resources and future information needs.

Most recently, VA HSR&D established the VIREC, a new field unit created to serve as an information resource and referral center for researchers, clinicians, and managers. We also feel it is imperative to develop a systematic plan for feedback, linkages, and ongoing discussions with the larger VA information infrastructure. We view the VIREC as a leader in this effort.

Much work remains to be accomplished regarding data quality. Additional research needs to be conducted on the integrity of VA data and databases to further build upon VA's firm informatics foundation. The new VIREC will focus more of its efforts on these issues as we enter the next millennium. However, we should also challenge our own researchers to assist in identifying, pinpointing, publicizing, advocating, and correcting data flaws that may exist across the myriad of databases maintained by VA.

To meet VA's goal of becoming the nation's state-of-the-art health care system, we must continue to improve our information systems for better assessment of patient outcomes, quality of care, and customer service. VA's information systems must serve multiple purposes and be easily accessible to many potential users: policymakers, managers, clinicians, and researchers.