



The Association of VA Anesthesiologists

October 28, 2015

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald,
Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Health
810 Vermont Avenue
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

On October 1, 2013, a majority of the VA Chiefs of Anesthesiology wrote then Secretary Shinseki a "Stop the Line" letter regarding our serious concerns that proposed Nursing Handbook changes, which would allow certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs) to become licensed independent providers, could put Veterans at risk. While the Stop the Line program was established to encourage VA employees to speak out to the Secretary when they believe Veterans are potentially being put at risk, we were never allowed a meeting with Secretary Shinseki on this critical health safety issue.

We salute you for your leadership in encouraging VA employees and whistleblowers to speak their conscience when it comes to Veterans' safety. That is why we would respectfully request a Stop the Line meeting with you to discuss the ill-advised proposal before it is put in the Federal Register or adopted by VA.

As VA Anesthesia Service Chiefs, we strongly oppose the proposal to establish independent practice for nurse anesthetists. This policy would break up the anesthesia care teams and ultimately lower the standard of care for Veterans. We also express genuine distress that such a profound change to the way anesthesia services are rendered in the VA system would be considered without adequate input from the VA anesthesia leadership and without any clearly articulated rationale for a change.

As we stated in our previous "Stop the Line" letter, as the Anesthesia Service Chiefs, we are charged with managing anesthesia resources and ensuring patient safety. Among our hospitals there is tremendous variability in the complexity of cases, age and health status of patients as well as types of services rendered. While the training for nurse anesthetists and anesthesiologists certainly overlaps, nurses and physicians are not interchangeable, and the differences become more evident with increased case complexity. Each of us bears the responsibility to recruit specific anesthesia providers based on the individual needs of our facilities and to deploy those providers based on their training and individual capabilities.

President

Ann Walia, MD
Anesthesiology, Pain Management &
Perioperative care
Tennessee Valley Healthcare System
1310 24th Ave., South
Nashville, TN 37212
615-873-7003
615-873-7821 fax
ann.walia@va.gov

President Elect

Kay B. Leissner, MD
Anesthesia and Critical Care Service
VABHCS
1400 VFW Parkway
West Roxbury, MA 02132
857-203-6070
857-203-5777 fax
Kay.leissner@va.gov

Immediate Past President

Malcolm Klein, MD
Anesthesiology Service
James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital
13000 Bruce B Downs Blvd,
MDC 123
Tampa, FL 33612
813.978.5919
813-978-5996 fax
malcolm.klein@va.gov

Vice President

Thomas Fuhrman, MD, MMSc, FCCP
Chief, Anesthesiology Service
Bay Pines VAHS
10000 Bay Pines Blvd
Bay Pines, FL 33744
727-398-6661 Ext 15832
Thomas.fuhrman@va.gov

Secretary

Yasser Sakawi, MD
Chief, Anesthesiology
Birmingham, VAMC
700 South 19th Street
Birmingham, AL 35233
205-212-3919
Yasser.sakawi@va.gov

Treasurer

Houman Amirfarzan, MD
Director Surgical Critical Care
VABHCS
1400 VFW Parkway
West Roxbury, MA 02132
857-203-6070
857-203-5777 fax
Houman.amirfarzan@va.gov

Regional Representatives

Susan V. Calhoun MD, MBA
Chief, Anesthesiology
VAMC Memphis
(901) 523-8990 x6518
Susan.calhoun@va.gov

Gurdev Rai, MD
Chief, Anesthesiology and Perioperative
Medicine
VAECHCS
1055 Clermont Street
Denver, CO 80220
303-393-2883
Gurdev.ra@va.gov

Jessica Feinleib, M.D.
203-932-5711
Jessica.Feinleib@va.gov



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As directed by the collaborative Anesthesia Service Handbook, we have embraced the care team model in which nurse anesthetists work under the medical direction or supervision of anesthesiologists and have recruited accordingly. The physician led model is the model of care in academic and private practice and undoing this model would provide a lower standard of care provided to our Veterans. As Anesthesia Service Chiefs, we have grave concerns for the adoption of a Nursing Handbook that would supersede or conflict with the Anesthesia Service Handbook. As previously stated, a change to the status of nurses and the abandonment of the care team model would be extremely disruptive to our services, leaving many of us with inappropriate staffing ratios which would directly compromise patient safety and limit our ability to provide quality care to Veterans.

Most importantly, we are concerned about protecting the health and lives of our Veterans. We would also add that, as professionals who have dedicated our careers to Veterans and VA, we have serious concerns about the damage to VA's reputation if even a single Veteran died on a VA operating table in a medical emergency when an anesthesiologist is not present because of new rules put in place under your leadership. You and countless VA employees have worked tirelessly to move VA beyond the Phoenix VA issues, and it could seriously harm public confidence in our health care system if such a tragedy occurred.

We would like to respectfully request a meeting with you and VHA Under Secretary for Health David Shulkin, MD to discuss all potential consequences, intended and unintended, of this proposed policy change to anesthesia services in a surgical setting.

Thank you for your service and leadership and, most importantly, for your strong commitment to Veterans. We look forward to working with you and Dr. Shulkin directly on this important patient safety issue.

Respectfully,

Ann Walia, M.D.
President, AVAA

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Ann Walia, MD
Anesthesiology, Pain Management &
Perioperative care
Tennessee Valley Healthcare System
1310 24th Ave., South
Nashville, TN 37212
615-873-7003
615-873-7821 fax
ann.walia@va.gov

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Kay B. Leissner, MD
Anesthesia and Critical Care Service
VABHCS
1400 VFW Parkway
West Roxbury, MA 02132
857-203-6070
857-203-5777 fax
Kay.leissner@va.gov

Immediate Past President

Malcolm Klein, MD
Anesthesiology Service
James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital
13000 Bruce B Downs Blvd,
MDC 123
Tampa, FL 33612
813.978.5919
813-978-5996 fax
malcolm.klein@va.gov

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Chief, Anesthesiology Service
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Bay Pines, FL 33744
727-398-6661 Ext 15832
Thomas.fuhrman@va.gov

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Treasurer

Houman Amirfarzan, MD
Director Surgical Critical Care
VABHCS
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West Roxbury, MA 02132
857-203-6070
857-203-5777 fax
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Regional Representatives

Susan V. Calhoun MD, MBA
Chief, Anesthesiology
VAMC Memphis
(901) 523-8990 x6518
Susan.calhoun@va.gov

Gundev Rai, MD
Chief, Anesthesiology and Perioperative
Medicine
VAECHCS
1055 Clermont Street
Denver, CO 80220
303-393-2883
Gundev.raai@va.gov

Jessica Feinleib, M.D.
203-932-5711
Jessica.Feinleib@va.gov



List of Endorsees

1. Ann Walia, MD
2. Art Wallace, MD
3. Andrew Oken, MD
4. Steven Boggs, MD
5. Christina Hayhurst, MD
6. Christopher Hughes, MD
7. Christina Matadial, MD
8. Clare Compton, MD
9. Daniel Reese, MD
10. Edward Kim, MD
11. Gurdev Rai, MD
12. Houman Amirfarzan, MD
13. Jane Arnold, MD
14. Jay Kambam, MD
15. Jessica Feinleib, MD
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17. Jonathan Bylund, MD
18. Jonathan Mark, MD
19. Kay Leissner, MD
20. Kevin Cunningham, MD
21. Larissa Grebenchtchikova, MD
22. Lori Kwan, MD
23. Nicholas Nedeff, MD
24. Piotr Michalowski, MD
25. Relin Yang, MD
26. Ricardo Martinez-Ruiz, MD
27. Rigoberto Sierra-Anderson, MD
28. Roma Polce, MD
29. Sunil Shah, MD
30. Susan Valley, MD
31. Yasser Sakawi, MD
32. R. David Warters, MD
33. Ghassan Moufarrege, MD
34. Harold Cook, MD
35. Marcos Javier, MD
36. Robert Steadman, MD
37. Benjamin Contreras, MD
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39. Karen Ringsred, MD
40. Kevin Novak, MD

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42. Barbara Page, MD
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44. Edward Bertaccini, MD
45. Bina Dara, MD
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58. Erin Brockway, MD
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61. Vidya Rao, MD
62. John Foster, MD
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65. Kelly Ortega, MD
66. Ashok Saha, MD
67. Anuj Aryal, MD
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69. Bhavani Kone, MD
70. Robert L. Dennison, MD
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72. Edward K. Leahy, MD
73. John R. Molinaro, MD
74. Robert T. O'Bannon III, MD
75. Michael P Mangione, MD
76. Stevin Dubin, MD
77. Margaret Tarpey, MD
78. Susan Calhoun, MD
79. Ghassan Moufarrege, MD
80. Harold Cook, MD
81. Marcos Javier, MD
82. Robert Steadman, MD

83. Benjamin Contreras, MD
84. Brian A. Williams, MD
85. Robert Kennedy, MD
86. Pranay Kanake, MD
87. Karthik Muthusamy, MD
88. Neela Ramaswamy, MD
89. Jennifer Burke, MD
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91. Gregory Vaughn, MD
92. James Wright, MD
93. David Sabo, MD
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98. Drew Swasey, MD
99. James Stormo, MD
100. Sam Aikele, MD
101. Erin Sullivan
102. Arun Bhandari
103. Michael Knitter, MD
104. Linda Lau, MD
105. Christopher G. Choukalas, MD, MS
106. Diane M Bottolfson, MD
107. William Pearson MD.
108. Catalin Ezaru
109. James Green
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187. Charles M Graham, MD
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208. Ralph Harding, DO

- 209. James Warren, M.D.
- 210. Gazi Shahid, M.D.
- 211. Ahmed A Shoukath, MD
- 212. Christopher D. Key, MD