

AUSN OPPOSES POLICY CHANGE TO ANESTHESIA CARE IN THE VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION NURSING HANDBOOK

By Timothy Foley, Legislative Intern, AUSN

On July 1, 2015 AUSN's Director of Legislative Affairs, Michael Little, sent a letter to Robert McDonald, Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, adamantly opposing a proposed policy change to the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Nursing Handbook. The proposed policy change is in regards to the switch of all Advance Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs) to Licensed Independent Practitioners (LIPs) and related guidelines concerning the use of anesthesia for Veteran patients.

AUSN outlined to Secretary Robert McDonald the importance of preventing the policy change in the VHA Nursing Handbook from becoming a reality. AUSN does not disagree with the need to regularly review and update system wide policies concerning nurse duties throughout VHA, however, we cannot support the changes to anesthesia care in surgical settings. In particular, AUSN is concerned by the requirement that all APRNs become designated as LIPs, who are mandated to "function as independent practitioners... regardless of scope of practice defined by their licensure." This proposed policy change would remove the necessity for a physician to oversee the administering of anesthesia to Veterans. AUSN finds the proposed policy change to be unnecessary and most importantly, could put the health and lives of America's Veterans at risk.

The current VHA policy, according to the VHA Anesthesia Service Handbook, encourages the use of a physician-led anesthesia team. Due to the health risks associated with the administration of anesthesia, and the fact that Veterans already have poorer health than some patient populations, AUSN believes it is in the best interest of Veterans that VHA continue to administer anesthesia under the current guidelines. As noted in the journal *Anesthesiology*, patients have better outcomes when a physician anesthesiologist is involved in surgical anesthesia care. The physician-led team based approach to providing anesthesia care in a surgical setting is practiced by the majority of top health providers in America. Veterans deserve that same level of high quality care.

Congress has already weighed in on this proposed policy change, and requested that surgical anesthesia provisions be excluded from the new draft of the VHA Nursing Handbook when it is published. This concern has also been expressed by other Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) as well as the VA's own Chiefs of Anesthesiology, and have urged VA leadership to reconsider this drastic policy change.

It is AUSN's firm belief that our nation's Veterans deserve the highest level of medical attention, and this proposed shortfall in care is unacceptable. AUSN is confident that Secretary Robert McDonald will see the deficiencies in the proposed changes to the VHA Nursing Handbook and openly oppose them to ensure the wellbeing of our Veterans.