

Preserve Safe Care for Veterans Protect Physician-led Anesthesia Care in VA

Support H.R. 7048, Protect Lifesaving Anesthesia Care for Veterans Act of 2022

ISSUE

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has proposed a new National Standards of Practice that eliminate anesthesiologists from the proven team-based model of anesthesia care. VA has proposed moving to a nurse-only model of anesthesia care that lowers the standard of care for Veterans compared to care civilians receive. In fact, every top civilian hospital in the country has rejected a nurse-only model for anesthesia care because it puts patients' health and lives at risk. The effort, centered around a senior VA staff memorandum known as the "Stone Memo," seeks to reverse a longstanding VA patient safety policy, re-affirmed in 2017, that provides for anesthesiologist-delivered or anesthesiologist-led team-based care for Veterans. The dangerous "Stone Memo" could become permanent as VA develops national standards of practice under its Federal Supremacy project.

In response to these concerns and for the safety of our Veterans, Rep. David Scott (D-GA-13), along with 13 bipartisan co-sponsors, introduced **H.R. 7048, Protect Lifesaving Anesthesia Care for Veterans Act**, which would require VA to retain the physician-led Anesthesia Team model currently used in VA and in every top hospital in the country. More than 96% of Americans receive their anesthesia care from a physician anesthesiologist-led care team.

BACKGROUND

With 12 to 14 years of education and 14,000 to 16,000 hours of clinical training, anesthesiologists are the most highly trained and skilled anesthesia professionals and serve a critical role in providing safe anesthesia care. Removing highly trained anesthesiologists from the care of Veterans lowers the standard of care in VA facilities and puts the lives of more than 9 million Veterans at risk.

VA patients generally have poorer health status than the general population. Many Veterans suffer from underlying health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure, all of which increase patient risk around the surgical experience. Additional risks have been identified for Veterans suffering from health conditions related to exposure to Burn Pits and Agent Orange, including serious respiratory diseases, Parkinson's Disease, and certain cancers. Access to highly educated and skilled anesthesiologists is critical in providing better outcomes and ensures Veterans receive the same standard of care as civilians.

VA's proposal presents unnecessary risk and is based on a badly flawed bureaucratic process that disregards more than four years of rulemaking and has silenced VA's own anesthesia experts, VA's chiefs of anesthesiology, and highly trained and experienced physician anesthesiologists. VA repeatedly ignored concerns of more than 400 of its own frontline anesthesiologists who four times put their jobs on the line and sent whistleblower notifications using the "Stop the Line" patient safety initiative, requesting the proposal be withdrawn to ensure Veteran safety. VA ignored and never responded to these important whistleblower notifications.

Key Points:

- ASA opposes any weakening of protections that ensure patients have access to the proven, safe, physician-led model of anesthesia care.
- VA's policy change unnecessarily threatens the safe, high-quality care delivered to our nation's Veterans, lowering the standard of care for those receiving anesthesia care in VA facilities.
- The VA memo disregards the National Anesthesia Directive 1123, a policy more than 6 years in the making, which was finally implemented in October 2019 resulting from a thorough and robust rule-making process.
- VA patients have complex medical conditions that pose a heightened risk of complications during surgery, creating a patient safety imperative to ensure the involvement of a physician anesthesiologist.

REQUEST:

Please cosponsor H.R.7048, Protect Lifesaving Anesthesia Care for Veterans Act, to ensure our nation's Veterans receive the safest, highest quality anesthesia care possible. Also contact VA Secretary McDonough to voice your opposition to any proposal that removes physician anesthesiologists from Veterans' care.