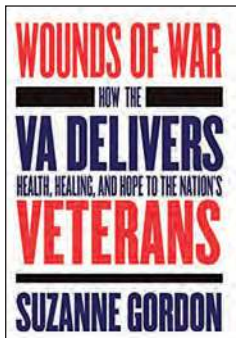


# Book Reviews

David A. Bennahum, MD, and Jack Coulehan, MD, Book Review Editors



## **Wounds of War: How the VA Delivers Health, Healing, and Hope to the Nation's Veterans**

Suzanne Gordon  
ILR Press, First edition, October 15,  
2018; 464 pages

Reviewed by Arnold R. Eiser,  
MD, MACP

Suzanne Gordon, a respected health care journalist and author, has written a compelling account of the many strengths of the Veterans Healthcare System in *Wounds of War: How the VA Delivers Health, Healing, and Hope to the Nation's Veterans*.

Gordon is an impassioned defender of the system that has regularly received public criticism from journalists and politicians when things have gone wrong in this vast bureaucratic system, whose patients bear the scars of combat and other injuries to their health during military service and often difficult re-entry into civilian life. Service-related disorders include bodily harm from exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam with its long list of related diseases including leukemia, lymphoma and amyloidosis. More recently, burn pit exposure in Iraq and Afghanistan have exposed servicemen to many toxic chemicals including dioxin; (a law has subsequently been passed with bipartisan support to research the toxicity of these burn pits). Moreover, the mental consequences of military service includes many instances of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Because the United States has been engaged in wars for much of its recent history, there is an abundance of traumatized veterans, both in those who saw combat as well as those who did not.

Gordon points out that the VA is exemplary in how it provides mental health care that is culturally competent regarding a veteran's military experience and this unique culture. The VA mental health care, because it is part of an expansive system of benefits, provides wraparound social services including a program to vigorously help homeless veterans obtain permanent shelter. In addition, VA mental health benefits, unlike private mental health insurance, are not limited based on a pre-specified number of treatments. The suicide rates of veterans utilizing VA mental health services decreased by 20 percent, but increased by 40 percent in those veterans who did not utilize available services in the same time period.<sup>1</sup>

Other strengths of the VA system include rehabilitation services (developed by the veterans' health system in the wake of the Civil War<sup>2</sup>), clinical advancements in treating PTSD, and forward thinking, pragmatic hospice and palliative care services.

The VA health system is the largest provider of graduate medical education, training more than 40,000 resident physicians and medical professionals. The VA system is essential in the training of geriatricians, and funding fellowships in this oft-neglected discipline.

Gordon documents these strengths with informative statistics as well as compelling narratives of innovative programs, commendable teamwork and exemplary clinical providers. There is a chapter on Karen L. Parko, MD, the former national director of the VA Epilepsy Centers. When Parko observed patients with psychogenic seizures ricocheting back and forth between neurology and psychiatry without effective intervention, she studied cognitive behavior therapy intensely so she could provide the needed service effectively within the VA Epilepsy Center at San Francisco. When she was the National Director of the Epilepsy Centers, she prioritized such training at all system centers.

David Shulkin, MD (AQA, Drexel University College of Medicine, 1998), former Undersecretary of the VA for Health Affairs under President Obama, and former Secretary of the VA for President Trump, echoed many of the strengths of the VA that Gordon details in the book. Shulkin also describes another strength now developing in the VA—the Whole Health Model of Care under the leadership of Tracy Caudet, MD. This model emphasizes the importance of the veteran-patient finding meaning and purpose in life, having the necessary social supports, skill building in self-care with the help of health coaches, and access to the appropriate clinical care. This model expresses the need for whole person healing, not just treatment of a disease or relief of a symptom. Private health care systems would benefit from learning this model.

*Wounds of War* should be read by physicians, not only because the Veteran health system is an essential component of the American health care system as well as a vital component of medical education, but also because the book illuminates the strengths of an integrated delivery system that is not motivated by profits and provides cross-functional coordination of medical care and social needs. The book provides a sound understanding of the unique features of veterans' health problems that is not always understood by clinicians.

It should also be read by journalists who are predisposed

to cover the plethora of problems within the VA system, which are unfortunately common in a bureaucratic, politically-controlled system inflicted with many dysfunctional factors. It is only fair to balance the strengths and weaknesses to provide an accurate assessment of the system as a whole.

Consultant groups led by RAND have detailed the serious flaws in the Veterans health system that need to be addressed.<sup>3</sup> Outsourcing for some specialized services may be necessary in selected instances, but as the author cautions, the Choice program of offering veterans civilian care has been plagued by cost over-runs, and has endangered funding for existing VA programs such as its Patient Safety Centers of Inquiry.

The book should also be read by active duty soldiers so that their only impression of this system does not come from the sensational negative headlines provided by mass media. Gordon has provided a valued view of a system which, even with its flaws, still has remarkable strengths to offer soldiers when their service to our nation is completed.

References

1. Claire A, Hoffmire CA, Kemp JE, Bossart RM. Changes in Suicide mortality for veterans and non-veterans by gender and history of VHA services 2000-2010. *Psychiatr Serv.* 2015 Sep; 66(9): 959-65. doi: 10.1176/appi.ps.201400031. Epub 2015 May 1.
2. Roots of VA Healthcare. <https://www.va.gov/health/NewsFeatures/2015/March/Roots-of-VA-Health-Care-Started-150-Years-Ago.asp>.
3. A Detailed Assessment of the Healthcare Delivery Systems and Management Processes the Department of Veterans Affairs. [https://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/documents/assessments/integrated\\_report.pdf](https://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/documents/assessments/integrated_report.pdf).

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*Engineering Medicine: Principles and Applications of Engineering in Medicine*, by Lawrence S. Chan, MD (AΩA, Northwestern University, 1995, Faculty), and William C. Tang; CRC Press; May 28, 2019; 356 pages.

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*What the Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City*, by Mona Hanna-Attisha, MD (AΩA, Wayne State University, 2010, Faculty); One World; June 19, 2018; 384 pages.

*Torii Haiku: Profane to a Sacred Life*, by David H. Rosen, MD (AΩA, University of Missouri-Columbia School of Medicine, 1970); Resource Publications; June 1, 2018; 98 pages.

**Corrections**

In the Winter 2019 issue, the poem “Salvaged,”\* should have listed Bonnie Salomon, MD, as the author.

In the same issue, the article “*The Serpent of Moses: Rembrandt’s iconography of the healing arts,*” had the captions on the two photos “Rembrandt, Death of the Virgin,” etching of 1639, and “Albrecht Dürer (Germany, Nuremberg, 1471-1528), Death of the Virgin, 1510, Woodcut, Sheet,” inadvertently switched.

We apologize for any confusion or inconvenience this may have caused.