

US veterans health care scandal used to push for privatization

By Tom Carter
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The Memorial Day holiday is being observed in the US amid a developing scandal involving the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and calls to privatize veterans' health care.

The Obama administration is currently embroiled in a major scandal following revelations that some VA hospitals systematically falsified records to conceal delays in treatment, with dozens of patients dying before they could be seen by a doctor. Hospitals in Arizona, Florida, Colorado, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas are now under investigation.

In the midst of this scandal, the Obama administration announced Saturday that it would begin allowing more military veterans to obtain treatment at private hospitals. Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki announced that the VA is "increasing the care we acquire in the community through non-VA care."

Leading Republican senator John McCain has—together with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat—endorsed the move to send more veterans to private hospitals, some of them for-profit facilities. About 10 percent of the VA's health care costs are already siphoned off to private firms.

Shinseki's announcement is an olive branch in the direction of a concerted campaign being conducted by sections of the political establishment and the media for the complete privatization of the VA. The *Wall Street Journal* carried a May 22 editorial arguing, "The best solution is to privatize the system," while similar arguments have been aired on major television and radio talk shows over the weekend.

Calls for the privatization of the VA make clear that the ongoing scandal will not lead to improvements in health care for veterans, but will instead be exploited to accelerate the political establishment's ongoing dismantling of the American health care system.

A misnamed "health care reform" has been a major priority of the Obama administration. Judged by its progress so far, the goals of this "reform" include lowering the quality of health care available to the working class, increasing the profitability of the insurance and medical corporations, reducing employer-provided health care, shifting the burden of paying for health care onto the poorest sections of the population, and setting the stage for further cuts to social programs such as Medicare and Medicaid.

Shinseki's gesture in the direction of further privatization suggests that the administration is prepared to consider extending this "reform" to the VA. The VA runs the largest single healthcare system in the country, and the only one that is owned and operated by the federal government.

The VA scandal has its origins in the revelations earlier this month that approximately 40 patients had died while on a waiting list at a Phoenix, Arizona veterans' hospital. A whistleblower revealed that the hospital systematically falsified its records to conceal backlogs and delays. When the hospital became the subject of an investigation, a second doctor stepped forward to reveal that medical records were being shredded to conceal the hospital's misconduct from investigators. (See: Arizona veterans' hospital scandal: Forty patients died awaiting treatment)

As many as 26 VA facilities are now under investigation. Allegations include corruption, falsifying records, illegal dealing of prescription drugs, concealing backlogs of appointments, incompetent administrators, and one outbreak of Legionnaire's disease caused by "human error."

Backlogged appointments—and efforts to conceal them—appear to have reached epidemic proportions. At one point a VA hospital in Columbia, South Carolina

had 3,800 backlogged appointments. A VA hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado was falsifying records so that it appeared that doctors were treating 14 patients a day.

Another issue is the deliberate underreporting of suicides among military veterans. Approximately 22 veterans commit suicide every day, or close to an average of one suicide every hour. As many as 25 percent of veterans returning from combat are diagnosed with post- traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

President Obama has refused to fire Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki, who has headed the agency for the past six years. Both Shinseki and Obama have made speeches expressing their supposed indignation and outrage. In a May 22 statement, Obama declared, “As commander in chief, I believe that taking care of our veterans and their families is a sacred obligation.” Notwithstanding all of the posturing, it is clear that the scandal presents a significant crisis for the administration.

The VA scandal provides a glimpse of the utter contempt with which the ruling class, together with all its institutions, regards the population. The lives of ordinary people are worth nothing. The death of a human being is simply another statistic to be falsified.

Doubtless this Memorial Day holiday will feature the standard declamations about “our military heroes” and the country’s “sacred duty” to honor its “brave men and women in uniform.” The VA scandal provides a glimpse of the ugly reality. Once soldiers have served their purpose in America’s monstrous imperialist war-machine, they are regarded as a burden to be unloaded.

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