

Addressing Missouri Veterans' Health: An Innovative Program at the University of Missouri Law Veterans Clinic and the School of Medicine

Richard J. Barohn MD^{1*}, Brent Filbert JD², Angela Drake JD², Stephen Brietzke MD¹, Charles Caldwell MD¹, Christopher Wilhelm MD¹, Kevin Kane MD¹, Martha Bradley Kleinhesselink JD²

¹University of Missouri School of Medicine – Columbia, MO

²University of Missouri School of Law – Columbia, MO

*Corresponding Author: Richard J. Barohn, MD, Email: rbarohn@health.missouri.edu

Abstract

Problem. Military veterans' needs are wide-ranging, often including problems that require both legal and health care solutions. However, during their education, law students are not introduced to or prepared to navigate the VA healthcare and disability compensation systems and the health issues of these clients and medical students who may be involved with providing health care for veterans, know little about the legal issues many face.

Approach. Through an innovative collaboration between the University of Missouri's Schools of Law and Medicine, students from both schools and their preceptors work together on veteran cases where legal and medical issues intersect. Teams are formed that include law and medical students when the veteran's specific case involves their health or medical care. Supervising faculty assigned to the teams provide professional guidance and technical assistance.

Outcomes. Law students engage and collaborate with medical students who conduct research, evaluate medical records, and provide medical information relevant to an individual veteran's legal case. A key component of the program is the bidirectional learning that occurs between the law and medical student participants which is aimed at teaching them the power of collaboration across their disciplines in service to veterans. Both groups of students are enriched by the experience, and the veteran receives integrated, relevant support to improve their access to needed services and resources.

Next Steps. Universities that have schools of law,

medicine, and a relationship ideally with a VA hospital system can replicate the program and expand timely legal services with relevant healthcare information to serve the veteran community.

Introduction

The recent transformation of the Veterans Health Administration to a "whole health" model of care underscores the importance and value of comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to veterans' health and wellness.¹ Veterans' mental health is complex, including risks for suicide, divorce, PTSD, homelessness etc. as well as their battlefield exposures (e.g., cholera, malaria, chemicals, environmental contaminants) that put them at high risk for premature death and the onset of medical conditions not seen in their same aged peer cohort. Compared to non-veteran peers, veterans report disproportionately higher rates of many of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in the U.S. (e.g., stroke, cancer, arthritis, diabetes).² However, some veterans struggle to navigate the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to pursue benefits and medical services they have earned, and they become overwhelmed and abandon efforts unless they can receive legal advice about the process and their rights. Similarly, veterans often experience difficulty without legal support in effectively applying for discharge upgrades through the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). An upgrade is often the pathway for veterans to become eligible for VA healthcare, disability compensation, and other benefits. We describe our experience involving medical students and physician faculty mentors in assisting law students on veterans' disability cases. We believe we are the first veterans law clinic to partner with a school of medicine to bring medical students into the process.

Many law schools offer free or low-cost legal clinics to military veterans. Based on our analysis of law schools who report such activity, at least 76 law schools currently assist veterans in their VA disability and benefits claims. A number of these law schools assist veterans in other areas including discharge upgrades, assistance with wills and estates, and employment claims. However, the overwhelming need for legal assistance involves disability claims and access to benefits that may involve medical issues. For this reason, involving medical professionals for guidance is critical to pursuing a positive outcome for veteran clients. We

recognize the potential importance of medical professionals such as medical students and faculty to a veteran's legal clinic.

Methods

The University of Missouri School of Law established the Veterans Law Clinic in 2014. The Clinic maintains a caseload of approximately 150 clients at any given time. The Clinic represents veterans and their families on VA disability compensation appeals as well as applications to various military boards for discharge upgrades. Since its inception, the Clinic has assisted more than 2,000 veterans and has surpassed \$20 million in VA disability benefits secured for clients.

Law students are not trained in medicine, and medical students are not trained in law, but both may encounter veterans after they graduate and practice. This knowledge gap may result in challenges, delays, or failure to secure needed care and services for veterans. For example, in terms of VA disability compensation, veterans receive monthly compensation for disabilities relating to injuries or illnesses incurred in or aggravated by their military service. The monthly compensation amount varies based on many factors, but primarily upon the disabling effects or severity of the injury or illness. Many medical questions arise when working on a VA disability compensation case; for example: What is the veteran's diagnosis? What caused the injury or illness? Is it related to the veteran's service? Does the injury or illness have any secondary or aggravating effects? How severe are the symptoms of the injury or illness? What kind of medication must the veteran take in order to treat or manage their symptoms? Does the medication have any secondary or aggravating side effects? Many lawyers are not equipped to answer these questions and must enlist the help of medical professionals to collaborate on these cases.

The opportunity to include medical students and supervising medical faculty at the University of Missouri Veterans Law Clinic was in response to the needs identified by the Clinic made to the Executive Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs who is a physician and Air Force veteran. The EVCHA met the director of the Clinic in 2020 at an event where she expressed a need for medical help for the law students analyzing data relevant to clients' cases. The EVCHA personally recruited physicians who were retired school of medicine faculty and who also were veterans with diverse medical specialties (e.g.,

endocrinology, pathology, pediatrics) to develop the program in collaboration with Clinic staff and supervising law school faculty. By the 2022 fall semester, there was programming and alignment of sufficient physician and fourth year medical student volunteers to begin.

The Clinic holds a kickoff, informational and training meeting each semester to acquaint the students to the issues the Clinic's clients typically face, and it highlights the availability of medical students for assignment to assist the law students on cases they will manage. Interestingly, inaugural medical students did not have any prior connection to the military through family, friends or personal service. Rather, the medical students are interested in helping veterans, and they recognize that they will rotate through the nearby Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans Hospital and could better understand veterans and some of their challenges if they participate.

Medical students assist on two types of cases: VA disability compensation appeals and DOD discharge upgrades. Once assigned a case, a medical student may be asked to research whether there is a medical link between two conditions such as migraines and tinnitus, or they may be asked to review a veteran's medical records to determine the severity of a specific condition. They determine whether there is a link between their symptoms and their service record, which could contain an injury or exposure, and also determine the severity of their medical condition based on record review. Medical students are given the opportunity to give presentations to the medical and legal teams on cases or projects they work on. This provides an opportunity for students and lawyers to collectively learn about a certain medical topic. Students also have the opportunity to present unusual and interesting medical cases at the annual School of Medicine Research Day, and these abstracts are then published in Missouri Health, along with all the other abstracts from Research Day. This gives them the opportunity to have a publication from their work in the clinic.^{3,4,5}

During the first four semesters of the program, leadership discussed and recommended making the Clinic an elective for the medical students. Prior to this, the students simply donated their time and effort. They thought that if it was an elective, there would be more dependable medical student involvement. The Senior Associate Dean for Medical Education worked with the school of medicine Curriculum Committee to establish the

elective for the Veterans Law Clinic. This elective was put in place for fourth year medical students in the Fall 2024 semester.

While other legal clinics serving veterans operate nationally, we know of no other clinic that integrates medical students to review cases and to work side by side with law students as described.

Results & Discussion

The Veterans Law Clinic is supported by funding from the Missouri State Legislature, private donations, and a federal grant. Thirty-five medical students have participated since 2022 and have worked on 42 cases alongside Mizzou law students.

Outcomes include a positive impact and valued exposure for law students to health and health care. Qualitative data demonstrate the value of multidisciplinary collaboration in this arena. A supervising physician noted that “the collaboration between legal and medical experts provides the most comprehensive understanding of each veteran’s disabilities and therefore provides the best possible outcomes for healthcare and benefits from the Veterans Administration for those who need it most. It also provides a very unique training environment for law and medical students to become the next generation of veteran advocates.” Another physician shared that “the partnership between MU’s law and medical school has allowed students of both disciplines to learn from each other while helping Missouri’s veterans. Those who served our country place their trust in our students to advocate and fight for them. It is an honor to be afforded the opportunity to help our veterans and their families.” (C. Caldwell, personal communication, Jan. 3, 2025).

A medical student shared that “working with the Veterans Law Clinic team was a unique learning experience as we get very limited exposure to the legal applications of medicine in our traditional training pathway. This partnership allowed me to practice my medical investigation as I practiced reviewing medical records and filling in any missing gaps in the written record based on my own knowledge. I also practiced my summarization and teaching skills when I discussed findings with my supervising physician and when I conveyed my findings in an easy-to-understand fashion to the law team and veterans. This experience was important for my career as I am currently in residency at a program where we frequently work at a VA hospital and encounter veterans with diseases related to their

service.”

Another medical student shared that “the partnership broadened my understanding of the challenges that veterans face. It also broadened my understanding of how lawyers can help my future patients.” (S. Rawat, personal communication, Sept. 11, 2024).

A supervising attorney shared “veterans’ law is extremely medical-heavy. I have zero medical training, so I find myself constantly Googling medical conditions and spending hours trying to do medical research for my veteran clients. This partnership helps me avoid rabbit-holes and saves valuable time because I can hand over research questions to people who are trained to answer them and focus my time on developing legal arguments. This is also true for reviewing medical records – it might take me several hours to review a set of medical records, while it would take a medical student or supervising physician thirty minutes to review them and find what we are looking for. Now, I cannot imagine practicing veterans’ law without having a medical professional one call or email away (*italics added for emphasis*). Their assistance on our files allows us to submit the most comprehensive appeals to the VA, which often leads to quicker and more favorable results for our veteran clients. The value of this partnership really cannot be put into words.”

Law students agree that “we in the legal field are not medical experts, so having someone able to explain the intricacies of the various VA disability ratings and medical conditions affecting the veteran is essential in forming an argument to use in our appeals to the VA. The medical knowledge of the students and doctors helps to bridge the gap between what we can dig up in the rating system to ultimately get a better outcome for our clients.”

Another law student said that “the experience working with the medical students helped me learn how to explain the law in terms someone who may not deal with legal terminology can understand.” (M. Kleinhesselink, Jan. 2, 2025).

The innovative medical-legal partnership shared can be replicated at other schools of law and medicine where a program already exists at a law school. The bidirectional experience is a unique example of interdisciplinary education and the service benefits to our veterans argue for its consideration and adoption at other universities nationwide.

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