Title 38 Hybrid Conversion for Ophthalmology Technicians

Per Public Law No: 111–163, the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is in the process of changing the status of eye technicians from Title 5 to Title 38 Hybrid series. The series will include positions at various skill levels, such as COA, COT and COMT. The series will encourage technicians to improve their skills, expand their roles in the clinic (e.g., become lead technicians) and increase their compensation. In the VHA, ophthalmology technicians provide a cost-effective multiplier effect for provider productivity, allowing significant increases in total clinic visits and number of unique patients seen per year. The conversion currently is on hold as the Central Office HR completes new premium pay codes for ophthalmology and then goes through the concurrence process again (this was previously completed in 2015). Both the AVAO and AAO support the bill.

DOD/VA Vision Center of Excellence (VCE)
The AVAO supports the DoD/VA Vision Center of Excellence (VCE): http://vce.health.mil/. David Eliason, MD is the VCE Deputy Director. CAPT Penny Walter, OD is the VCE Executive Director. The VCE’s goals are to improve vision health, optimize readiness, and enhance quality of life for service members and Veterans. The VCE produces monthly CME eye trauma teleconferences for DoD and VA clinicians to review current cases of ocular trauma in the DoD focusing on the types of injury, treatment, and the clinical outcomes. The VCE also provides quarterly reports of service members suffering significant eye injury to the VA national program directors of ophthalmology, optometry, and blind rehabilitation and six-month reports on recent service member eye injuries to the national ophthalmology and optometry consultants for each service branch. In addition, the Defense and Veterans Eye Injury and Vision Registry (DVEIVR) is available to DoD, VA and affiliated university clinicians and researchers for data reporting. Multiple projects are currently in progress evaluating the longitudinal effects of eye injuries on Service members and Veterans. The VCE newsletter for clinicians is available at https://vce.health.mil/Resources/Products/Newsletters. In addition, VCE clinical recommendations are available at https://vce.health.mil/Clinicians/Clinical-Practice-Recommendations.

New key VCE updates and initiatives include:

- Hosting Blinded Veterans Association of the United States and the Blinded Veterans of the United Kingdom during Project Gemini, April 2017.
- Publishing the fourth Clinical Recommendation on visual sequelae of TBI: https://vce.health.mil/Clinicians/Clinical-Practice-Recommendations/Eye-
**Care and TBI**
- Fact Sheets for clinicians and health care workers on how to deal with visually impaired/blind patients in both clinic and in-patient settings
- Beginning a series of classes on vocational rehabilitation for visually impaired veterans targeting VA and DoD therapists and providers
- Partnering with the Hearing Center of Excellence to provide education to audiologists on dual-sensory impaired patients
- Serving on the review panels for the VRP (DoD) and the RR&D3 (VHA) regarding applications for vision research funding
- Continuing Monthly Trauma Teleconference Rounds (available to DoD and VA ophthalmologists).
- Continuing quarterly publication, Frontlines (a review of noteworthy findings within vision research).
- Presented scientific posters on:
  - Evidence Based Vision Data
  - Photophobia and Hyperacusis Associated with Lyme-Induced Optic Neuritis
  - A Pathway for Advanced Compositional Analysis of Ocular Foreign Bodies
  - Ocular Manifestations of Mosquito Transmitted Diseases
  - Clinical Outcomes of Open Glove injuries
  - Rehabilitation of Patients with Visual Field Loss Associated with TBI

**Patient Access**
Access to care continues to be a top priority for the VHA. The Veterans Choice Program (VCP) is a VHA nationwide program that utilizes health care contracts to provide eligible Veterans access to primary care, inpatient/outpatient specialty care, mental health care, limited emergency care, and limited newborn care for enrolled female Veterans following birth of a child. In August 2017, the President signed the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, which authorized $2.1 billion in additional funds for the VCP. More details on the VCP are available at: [https://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/](https://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/).

The VA Eye Care Handbook expired in March 2016 concurrent with VHA’s decision to replace all Handbooks with Directives. A revised **Eye Care Directive** is being reviewed by the Central Office.

2. **Public Service Activities**

**Low Vision**
The AVAO is actively involved in the Continuum of Care/Low Vision Program developed in the VHA to provide high caliber visual rehabilitation to visually impaired Veterans: [http://www.rehab.va.gov/blindrehab/](http://www.rehab.va.gov/blindrehab/)

**Evidence-based Synthesis Program**
The VHA Evidence-based Synthesis Program (ESP) ([https://www.hsrdrresearch.va.gov/publications/esp/](https://www.hsrdrresearch.va.gov/publications/esp/)) provides systematic reviews on healthcare topics important to VA stakeholders. The published reviews related to ophthalmology include:

Currently, there is one ophthalmic review in progress:
- Comparative Effectiveness of Intraocular Lenses (protocol under development)

**Teleretinal Imaging**
The VHA Teleretina Imaging Program continues to enable Veterans with diabetes mellitus to be evaluated for diabetic retinopathy: [https://www.telehealth.va.gov/sft/index.asp](https://www.telehealth.va.gov/sft/index.asp). Under the guidance of lead ophthalmologist, Dr. Len Goldschmidt, and lead optometrist, Dr. Gerald Selvin, the program increases Veterans’ access to diabetic retinopathy screening, and improves referrals of those in need of more complex eye care. Approximately 3 million Veterans have been imaged in the program to date. Fewer than 30% of Veterans are dilated for their images with better than 85% readable (undilated) images. The program is examining the use of computer-based algorithms to facilitate reading of images and expanding to AMD screening.

### Ophthalmic Surgical Outcomes Database (OSOD)
A collaborative project between Patient Care Services and the National Surgery Program, the Veterans Affairs Surgical Quality Improvement Project (VASQIP), the Ophthalmic Surgical Outcomes Database (OSOD) cataract pilot was a three-year project involving five large VA hospitals that investigated risk factors associated with cataract surgery outcomes. There has been one new publication from this project since the last councilor report in March 2017:


### Technology-based Eye Care Services (TECS)
The Technology-based Eye Care Services (TECS) was launched at the Atlanta VA in 2015. It is a clinical program designed to improve access to eye care for veterans. TECS is funded by the VHA Office of Rural Health (ORH) and seeks to ensure that rural Veterans utilizing Community Based Outpatient Clinics for primary care surrounding the Atlanta VA also can receive an accurate vision check as well as critical eye disease screening as part of their local primary care visit. Using proven, effective, ophthalmic equipment, the VHA’s secure IT infrastructure, trained ophthalmology technicians, and a VA credentialed and licensed ophthalmologist, TECS has helped minimize travel for Veterans in the Atlanta VAMC who require eye care. Key updates on TECS include:

- 6,000+ Veterans screened to date
  - 32% same day; 100% within 30 days
  - 8% without a documented eye exam documented for 5 years; 3% for 10 years
  - 8% diagnosed with new visually significant eye disease
  - 16% rural/highly rural and 21% homeless
- High patient satisfaction: (4.95 out of 5) for overall TECS services
- The American Medical Association passed a resolution in the AMA House of Delegates in June 2017 that encouraged the VA to continue to explore telemedicine approaches to increase access to quality health care in Veterans, including the TECS program
- The ORH has listed TECS as Collaborative Rural Access Solution ([https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/providers/collaborativeaccess.asp](https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/providers/collaborativeaccess.asp)):
  - VA medical centers in interested in establishing a local TECS program can apply directly to ORH for funding
  - 5 sites currently funded (Atlanta, Hines, Charleston, Omaha, Northern California)

3. **Membership Activities**

The AVAO currently has 92 paid and 86 unpaid members for a total of 178 members. The AVAO website: [http://www.avao.org/AVAO/Welcome.html](http://www.avao.org/AVAO/Welcome.html).

4. **Annual Meeting and Educational Activities**

On Monday, November 13 the DOD/AVAO will present on a noontime symposium entitled “*World I to Now: The Evolution of Combat Eye Care and Rehabilitation in the DoD and VA Across 100 Years of Conflict*”. It will be held in Room 239 from 12:45pm – 1:45pm.

5. **Other Activities**
• The AVAO worked with VHA national pharmacy management group to add medications to the VHA national formulary
• The AVAO contributed to AAO Surgical Scope Fund and JCHAPO

6. **Major Initiatives for the Year**

• Complete the Title 5 to Title 38 conversion for ophthalmic technicians
• Complete the VHA Eye Care Directive and a care coordination agreement between eye care, primary care and emergency medicine
• Press for effective ways to monitor ophthalmic outcomes from the Veterans Choice Program
• Continue to expand the TECS and Teleretinal Imaging programs