

Remarks as Given

The Honorable Anthony J. Principi

Secretary of Veterans Affairs

WRAMC-VA Orthopedic & Prosthetic Workshop

Ritz Carlton Hotel

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Thank you, Dr. Aisen, for the warm introduction.

Good afternoon, and thank you for inviting me to help launch a new beginning for both VA's orthopedic and prosthetics research and development, and for a brighter future for America's disabled service members and veterans, men and women who now bear the burdens of mid-20th Century technology even as they live surrounded by the envelope-pushing technologies of the 21st Century.

I want to thank our colleagues at Walter Reed Army Medical Center for their enthusiastic support and partnership in our mutual goal of restoration of the broken bodies of the men and women we servewithout regard for whether they still wear the uniforms of our armed forces or the civilian clothes of a veteran.

Shortly after I took office in 2001, President Bush brought Secretary Rumsfeld and me together to express, in very strong terms, his expectation that DoD and VA would work together in service to the men and women who embody our armed forces.

That partnership will one day produce common healthcare protocols across the very wide spectrum of medical programs—from a common formulary, to medical equipment and prescription drug procurement, to records management.

The President certainly has a stewardship interest in protecting the taxpayers' dollars through economies of scale, bulk purchasing, reductions in paperwork, improved communications links, and simplified accounting procedures—all of which have the potential to maximize every dollar VA and DoD devote to healthcare for active duty troops and our veterans.

But the heart of the President's directive was, first and foremost, the well-being of the men and women who put their lives on the line for the freedoms you and I enjoy every day.

Secretary Rumsfeld and I have no problem interpreting the President's message; and we have been working together to create a service-to-grave continuity between our two departments.

For our part, VA has learned a great deal from the experiences of previous wars—and now that troops, both wounded and healthy, are beginning to return home, our knowledge is saving lives and speeding recoveries for the young heroes it is our privilege to serve.

Together, VA and DoD experts are finding ways to move records more efficiently between our two agencies and to share critical medical information electronically as if we were, for all intents and purposes, one shared system.

Our process began long before our war in Iraq—and today, our joint planning efforts, and the results of a task force the President created on Improving Health Care for Veterans, are breaking new ground to ensure that servicemembers and veterans—especially those wounded on the battlefield—are receiving the highest quality care available anywhere.

Our goals are simple: to ensure every serviceman and women returning from combat with a service-related condition receives priority consideration and world-class service from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and we intend to provide a seamless transition from active duty to VA for every separating service member.

The armed forces and VA serve the same individuals, just at different times in their lives. Those individuals are the common thread from which VA, the Department of

Defense, and the military services must weave an unbroken tapestry of service. Some of the strongest fibers in that thread can be found in the halls of Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the National Naval Medical Center where the wounded from Iraq are building foundations of new lives.

Since the beginning of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, I have been deeply humbled during my visits to many of our most seriously wounded servicemen and women now in the care of the compassionate doctors, nurses, and staffs at Walter Reed Army and Bethesda Naval hospitals.

Caught up in the cruel and capricious winds of war, many of these young men and women became unwitting candidates for prostheses and orthoses.

During my bedside visits, I am deeply touched by their strength of will, their determination to overcome their wounds, and their unflagging trust in the medical professionals treating their often-horrific injuries.

My visits increase my determination to help make these heroes whole again—and I know each one of you shares with me the deepest sense of indebtedness to our self-sacrificing citizen-soldiers, particularly youngsters who have lost arms and legs at a time in their lives when society beckons them to be full participants in what ought to be a bright and exciting future.

How can we not strive to develop our orthopedic and prosthetic services to meet their needs? How can we not devote every available resource to explore the newest and best technologies, to obtain and learn from the best research, to train the best people, to make whole our best citizens? The answer of course is, we must meet these challenges. We must rise above them. And we must deliver to our disabled soldiers and veterans hope for a future that includes lives unfettered by disabilities.

Advancing orthopedic and prosthetic technology; nurturing vibrant partnerships among the federal, private-sector, and university researchers; and ramping up training for prosthetists, orthotists, and physical therapists, among others, are just a few of the many crucial series of steps toward achieving true inter-operability between VA and DoD prosthetic and orthopedic services.

I am always impressed with the latest breakthroughs in micro-electronic and mechanical devices. The idea of nano-technologies creating cell-sized gears, directed by cell-sized cameras, to repair the human body at the cellular level is incredibly exciting.

Today, technologies like micro-servos and micro-transmitters—that not that long ago were science-fiction dreams—are well within reach of practical development and application. I don't doubt they will become as ubiquitous to the next generation of Americans as cell phones and GPS navigation systems are to today's.

The dreams of one generation become the science of the next generation and the tools of the generation after that. Just as the field of myoelectrics tantalized the visions of prostheses researchers forty years ago, myoelectric devices are, two generations later, relatively commonplace.

Our challenge is to ensure that dreams continue to come true for the newest generation of men and women called upon to sacrifice their bodies and limbs in Freedom's defense.

Miraculous as it seems, the progress of the past represents only the first steps—if you will—in advancing prosthetics to embrace even more advanced technologies using embedded microprocessors, composite materials, and neural feedback systems not just to open doors to opportunities for amputees...but to allow amputees to build their own

doors, open them, and walk, or run, or skate, confidently through to opportunities of their own designs.

VA, collaborating with Walter Reed Army Medical Center and our mutual research and development partners, must not be just on the cutting edge of orthopedic and prosthetic technology—I want us to be out in front of it, leading the way in every area: research and development; computer-aided design and manufacturing; training programs for prostheses professionals; and, perhaps most important, meeting the practical and emotional challenges facing amputee veterans.

Your workshop provides the sparks needed to ignite the tinder of ideas we will subsequently tap for the heat of research and the light of developed products and services. At stake are the lives of our amputee veterans, lives VA can make whole by applying your compassion, your knowledge, and your vision to the challenges facing today's amputees.

If osseointegration is a light on horizon, then let's lift that light higher and let it warm amputees with its possibilities. The collaboration between VA and Walter Reed to maintain a common database of amputees who might benefit from new interventions like osseointegration is a long-overdue advance toward our goal of VA-DoD partnership.

Likewise, we need to better utilize our extensive computer-aided design and manufacturing resources; There is no reason VA should not lead the way in CAD-CAM technology, and I applaud RR&D's creation of a multi-disciplinary group of CAD-CAM users, trainers, and representatives from Otto Bock Health Care to determine how VA can better leverage CAD-CAM to the advantage of veteran amputees.

Perhaps the most fundamental benefit of RR&D's future vision for VA amputee care is in the development of a comprehensive program of continuing research and development education for amputee healthcare practitioners.

All the rehabilitation technology, all the tools, all the bells and whistles that can be assembled have no value to an amputee if they cannot be applied by knowledgeable, imaginative, skilled professionals.

I am heartened by our collaborative efforts to develop training protocols to engage the best minds throughout VA and Walter Reed to focus on the challenges facing today's amputees and veterans who will, no doubt, need your skills tomorrow.

John Steinbeck wrote, **“Man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments.”**

America's veterans grew our Nation just as surely as a gardener grows the finest rose. Proud tillers of freedom, they toiled in the battlefields; devoted parents of liberty, they stood with unflagging vigils in the cold and lonely outposts all around the world; their concept of our Nation, their country, their home, was of a place where they and their children could thrive and achieve with no barriers save their own imaginations.

We cannot let them, or their accomplishments, wither on the vines of disability simply because they have lost the use of their arms or legs—or both. I know all of you are committed to helping them learn to tend their dreams with new tools and new skills. I am proud of your dedication and compassion.

Your knowledge, skills, and partnerships are making it possible for service member and veteran amputees to climb up the stairs of their concepts and emerge as whole as we can make them to enjoy the full flowering of their accomplishments.

Thank you, and May God bless the United States and the men and women who protect her.