

GUEST EDITORIAL

VA's national rehabilitation special events: Therapy at its best.

Historically, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has been a recognized world leader in rehabilitation, appreciating the value of rehabilitation and its far-reaching effects. In a field where efficacy of treatment may prove difficult to measure [1], VA's rehabilitation programs demonstrate that even a slight improvement in a person's quality of life is a real, if not always tangible, rehabilitation result worth considering.

Bearing that in mind, VA sponsors four national rehabilitation special events each year: The National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, The National Veterans Wheelchair Games, the National Veterans Golden Age Games, and the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival. These events, open to veterans served by VA medical facilities, promote healing of the body as well as the spirit through challenging competitions that push participants to their limits. This healing of the spirit does not depart from the scientific. It is purely the by-product of successful physical, recreational, and art therapy programs that help veterans overcome their physical limitations.

Established in 1987, the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic introduces veterans with spinal cord injuries or disease, neurological conditions, or blindness to adaptive sports and recreational activities such as Alpine and Nordic skiing, rock climbing, scuba diving, ice hockey, horseback riding, and fishing. Through this recreational therapy, disabled veterans practice movements and exercises that help them improve their motor skills and independence, while gaining self-confidence.* Beyond the physical benefits achieved through these activities, disabled veterans improve their emotional and social functions by exchanging treatments, rehabilitation methodology, and best practices with fellow veterans living with the same type of physical limitations. Held at the Rocky Mountains each year, the Winter Sports Clinic is an informal symposium of living research, which over



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the years has resulted in state-of-the-art adaptive ski equipment, world-class athletes, improved physical conditioning of profoundly disabled veterans, and an enhanced understanding of disabled people by all who come in contact with the event.

Like the Winter Sports Clinic, the National Veterans Wheelchair Games provide rehabilitation to disabled veterans. Established in 1981, the Games are the largest annual wheelchair sports competition in the world. This event gives newly disabled veterans the opportunity to gain or enhance sports skills in a therapeutic environment, while introducing them to experienced wheelchair athletes who serve as their guides or mentors. According to their ability, participating veterans compete in basketball, softball, rugby, slalom, swimming, and track and field to name a few sports. VA therapists are at hand the

*Anderson L. Positive impacts related to participation in the Winter Sports Clinic. 2000.

week of the Games, which are held in different cities every summer, to instruct the veterans in the sports while getting them ready for competition. These Games are an outgrowth of VA's historic involvement in wheelchair sports, which began after World War II, when young disabled veterans began playing wheelchair basketball at VA hospitals.

Foreseeing an aging veteran population, VA has led in geriatric care and research for decades. From this commitment grew the most progressive senior multievent sports and therapeutic recreation program in the country: The National Veterans Golden Age Games. Preceded by recreational activities at VA hospitals and nursing homes, the first Golden Age Games were held in 1985. Since then, the Games have provided veterans aged 55 or older various degrees of physical conditioning through sports adapted to their motor and cognitive skills. Comparable to the Winter Sports Clinic and the Wheelchair Games, the Golden Age Games give participants, mostly in the over-70 category, a goal for which to train during the year. There lies the rehabilitative secret of these recreational therapy programs: they give participants the skills to improve physiologically and the motivation to practice them year-round. A lack of either component would impede successful rehabilitation.

VA also offers, as part of its excellence in recreational therapy, world-class art therapy programs to veterans receiving care at many of its 1,300 medical facilities. In 1981, Muriel Barbour, the chief of recreation therapy at the McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia, took her program a step further by creating a visual arts competition she called "Vet Arts." A year later, Shirley Jefferies, a recreational therapist at the Waco, Texas, VA Medical Center, initiated a performing arts competition called the "National Music Competition for Veterans." Over the years, both programs expanded. In 1989, they merged and added a drama and a dance division to become the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival. Since then, the Festival has spotlighted the four creative arts therapies: art, dance, drama and music, while celebrating the artistic achievements of veterans in 46 different categories. Approximately 3,000 veterans compete at their local level for the opportunity to participate in the Festival. Local winners compete nationally before the Festival. Only first place winners at the national level are invited to

attend the Festival, which consists of a week of various artistic modality workshops, culminating on an art exhibition and stage show with live orchestral accompaniment provided by the Recording Industries Music Performance Trust Fund.

While in most cases, physical trauma can be easily perceived and largely understood by the untrained eye, psychological diseases, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, can go undetected and often misunderstood for years, even by those closest to their sufferers. Creative arts therapy fashions a language for patients to communicate the depth of their psychological traumas in a nonintrusive way. Through the lyrics of their songs or through the subject of their paintings, patients can unleash their mental torments or haunting memories. This cathartic process helps therapists determine the appropriate course of treatment or adjust the methods being used. The Creative Arts Festival then becomes the culmination of a process of self-discovery and the beginning of a heightened sense of self-reliance and community. Patients who have been recluses for years now have a communal nonthreatening form of expression and are part of an environment that foments healing through disclosure. As does VA's other three National Rehabilitation Special Events, the Festival gives veterans a tangible goal and a benchmark for which to strive in their rehabilitation process.

Although results are not always easy to measure, one cannot deny the value of recreational therapy in the face of not only increased function and improved motor skills but also, most importantly, heightened self-esteem, developed social skills, and newfound self-reliance [2]. VA's National Rehabilitation Special Events therapy is therapy at its best.

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REFERENCES

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