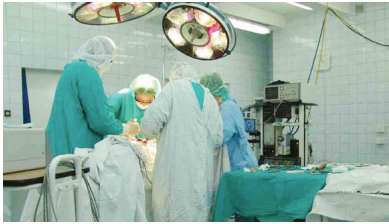


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- FoxNews.com

The Department of Veterans Affairs has linked the recent deaths of at least 19 vets diagnosed with cancer in 2010 and 2011 to appointment backlogs and delays at VA hospitals and clinics and resulting hindrances in care, according to an internal document.

Specifically, those 19 deceased veterans are reportedly part of a larger group of 82 vets who have either died, are now dying or have sustained serious health consequences from the VA's failure to conduct medical screenings like colonoscopies and endoscopies in a timely, or prompt, fashion.

CNN reported as much after obtaining an internal U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs document revealing the appointment backlogs – and potentially lethal repercussions – is national in scope.

“The fact that we’ve had veterans who have died in the very facilities that are supposed to be taking care of them, and not by natural means, by means that could have been prevented is egregious,” Rep. Jeff Miller, the chair of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, told CNN. “And it’s not acceptable.”

The Florida Republican reportedly added the VA has not only thus-far failed to the name those responsible for the deaths and injuries, but also refused to internally discipline or fire anyone regarding the problem.

“I don’t want to hear the excuse anymore that ‘It was multi-faceted. ...There were many people involved’ “ Miller told the news agency. “If there were many people involved then they all need to go.

“We are not asking for one particular person, we want to know exactly why things happened and who was held responsible. At this point publicly, we haven’t seen anybody held responsible.”

One South Carolina veteran described to CNN how he had begged his local VA hospitals for months for a colonoscopy appointment after suffering painful rectal bleeding in 2011.

“I took it upon my own self to call the department that scheduled that and ask them about it. And they said this was the earliest appointment that I could get,” Barry Coates, a 44-year-old Army veteran, told CNN about the appointment he finally received—set for roughly a year after he first saw a doctor about the symptoms.

“And I explained to the lady what I had already been through and how much pain I had, and I said if I wait this long there might not be ... (anything) we can do about it then. I could be even dead by then. And the only thing she could tell me was ‘I understand that, sir, but I don’t have any control over that.’”

The VA noted scheduling delays previously reported to exist at its Augusta, Ga. and Columbia, S.C. hospitals sparked a national review that has since strengthened oversight and improved the system.

“As a result of the consult delay issue VA discovered at two of our medical centers, the

Veterans Health Administration (VHA) conducted a national review of consults across the system,” reportedly wrote Dr. Robert Petzel, the VA’s under secretary for health. We have redesigned the consult process to better monitor consult timeliness.

“We continue to take action to strengthen oversight mechanisms and prevent a similar delay at another VA medical center. We take any issue of this nature extremely seriously and offer our sincerest condolences to families and individuals who have been affected and lost a loved one.”

As for Coates, the colonoscopy he finally got reportedly revealed a baseball-sized cancerous tumor that now threatens his life - and for which he is now undergoing chemotherapy.

“I don’t know what my outcome is going to be,” Coates told CNN. “I just try to live every day like it’s my last day.”

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