

VA says glaucoma patients at Palo Alto facility suffered severe vision loss due to mistreatment

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The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has confirmed its Palo Alto facility put the chief of optometry on administrative leave and reassigned another optometrist while it recently investigated the treatment of hundreds of eye patients, some of whom experienced significant vision loss under the department's care.

In February the VA Palo Alto Health Care System, or VAPAHCS, initiated a three-month internal review of 381 charts and determined 23 glaucoma patients experienced "progressive visual loss" while receiving treatment in the hospital's optometry department, the Veterans Affairs office in Washington, D.C. told The Daily News. The VA informed seven of those patients that improper care might have caused their blindness.

At issue is whether the optometry department failed to follow VA policy requiring it to consult with medical doctors on glaucoma cases — possibly costing the patients their vision.

"The VA Palo Alto Health Care System has a policy that all patients with glaucoma seen in the optometry section should have their cases overseen and reviewed by the ophthalmology section," VA Press Secretary Katie Roberts said in a statement. "Earlier this year, VAPAHCS leadership became aware this had not occurred in some cases. VAPAHCS leadership took immediate action, ordering an exhaustive review of all glaucoma patients and patients at risk for glaucoma who were being actively seen in optometry."

Of the seven blind patients contacted, two have filed lawsuits, the VA said, noting it settled one claim and the other is pending.

During the review doctors identified 87 other veterans as at high risk of losing their sight and placed all of them except one — who was living out of state — under the care of the ophthalmology department, the VA said.

Glaucoma is a group of eye diseases that can cause vision loss and blindness by damaging the optic nerve, according to the National Eye Institute's Web site. Optometrists are doctors of optometry, with a minimum of four years of training, who can treat glaucoma if certified. In contrast, ophthalmologists are medical doctors who go through eight years of training, including medical school, an internship and a residency.

As a result of the probe, the VAPAHCS ophthalmology department now handles all glaucoma cases and is supervising the optometry department, the VA said.

The investigation came after doctors discovered a 62-year-old male veteran had "significant visual loss in one eye as a result of poorly controlled glaucoma" during a Jan. 16, 2009, visit to the ophthalmology clinic, the VA said in a second written statement. The man had been getting treatment at the hospital's optometry unit since at least June 13, 2005, when a clinic note indicated optometrists there suspected he had glaucoma.

"Ophthalmology Service became concerned that optic nerve damage and visual loss might have been avoided if the patient had been referred to ophthalmology sooner," the statement said.

A VA physician involved in the investigation said the 62-year-old patient saw Optometry Chief Curtis Keswick for years but wasn't given any treatment for his glaucoma. The patient went blind in one eye and experienced serious vision loss in the other, said the physician, who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisal.

"They watched the optic nerve get worse, worse, worse, and they documented it," the doctor said. "This particular patient was never even put on eyedrops."

Reached by phone Monday, Keswick said he couldn't give his version of what happened because the VA had barred him from speaking about the case.

"As part of the investigation, which is still ongoing, I have been mandated not to talk with anyone about it," Keswick said. "They put me in a position to be very quiet about it."

Optometrists and ophthalmologists have been fighting over glaucoma certification requirements for optometrists after state legislation passed last year broadened optometrists' ability to treat the disease and prescribe medication.

Backers of the bill, sponsored by state Sen. Lou Correa, D-Santa Ana, argued at the time that it would enable more people with glaucoma, especially poor patients and those residing in rural areas, to receive treatment. Ophthalmologists have expressed concern about the amount of training optometrists receive.

Last week the California State Board of Optometry accepted final education recommendations for the certification and will enact regulations in January 2010, said Mona Maggio, executive officer at the board.

There are about 7,000 licensed optometrists in California, 475 of whom are currently certified to treat glaucoma, Maggio said. She added that the board had received no complaints about optometrists mismanaging glaucoma cases.

Keswick has no California glaucoma certification, according to the state board's Web site. However, he is also licensed in Washington state, where additional certification is not required for optometrists to treat glaucoma with topical medications, a spokeswoman for the Washington

Department of Health said.

Doctors with certifications from other states can practice at the VA. However, the VA has a stricter ethics policy than many private institutions, VA spokeswoman Roberts said.

"There has been a legal push throughout this country to allow optometrists to treat glaucoma," said Dr. Anne Coleman, a University of California, Los Angeles ophthalmology professor who has studied the disease for 25 years. "The (California) Legislature has in essence decided for access reasons, rightly or wrongly, that this is allowed — but that doesn't mean necessarily that the trainings are equivalent."

Coleman described glaucoma as "a difficult disease to diagnose and treat" and said specialists with years of experience often seek second opinions when diagnosing the condition.

"It's their lives — it's their eyes," Coleman said of the patients. "It should have nothing to do with our egos . . . I would like us to all work together to help the patients and society."

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