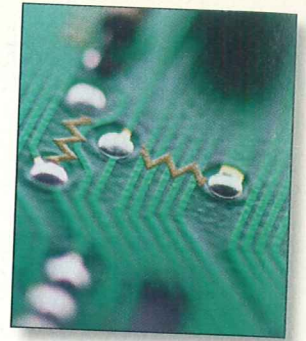


# TECH TALK

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## VIReC: Promoting Information Sharing in the Health Services Research Community

In most sophisticated organizations today, you'll find varying degrees of computer literacy among the staff. Advances in internet and telecommunications technologies, a profusion of new software products, and the availability of inexpensive yet powerful computer hardware all contribute to a technologically diverse workplace.

The same holds true for the health services research community: Investigators in the VA's Health Services Research and Development (HSR&D) service represent a spectrum of technological experience—from the novice to the expert. Since computer technology has become more and more integral to health services research, allowing increasingly efficient and cost-effective storing and analysis of data, researchers in the VA often need support and training to get the most from the databases and other electronic data sources that are key to their research.

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To address this need, the HSR&D established the VA Information Resource Center (VIReC) on July 1, 1998. Building on previous VA publications and conferences, VIReC offers technological information and support to researchers, managers, and clinicians navigating VA databases. Although many of these databases are actually housed at the Austin Automation Center in Texas, VIReC, which is located on the campus of the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital in Hines, IL, serves as the national source for VA database user guides, and offers consultation on these resources to those who need it.

### A VIReC PRIMER

VIReC provides the research community with information about the content, structure, reliability, validity, and accessibility of VA and other select data sources. By supporting researchers in conducting their studies, VIReC helps to improve health care for the VA population.

Specifically, VIReC aims to:

- update previously developed HSR&D database resource guides and maintain the library of Statistical Analysis System program shells;

- create new user manuals for data systems as they come online;
- develop a network of data experts and consultants for each of the relevant databases;
- evaluate the reliability and validity of the major VA databases;
- provide the scientific review boards of the HSR&D service and Cooperative Studies Program (CSP) with ongoing evaluation of proposals concerning VA databases; and
- act as liaison between HSR&D and the national VA information offices—representing HSR&D, as appropriate, on data system development projects, particularly those focusing on the new National Patient Care Database (NPCD) and the Decision Support System (dSs).

VIReC's staff includes experts in health services research, health economics, medical demography, biostatistics, clinical trials, and informatics. They're organized into four primary interdependent service lines—research, customer service, information and technology, and dissemination and promotion—to perform key functions and address issues more effectively.

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### Research

The VIREC research service line's first responsibility is to develop and update database user guides. So far, the research staff has posted and updated information regarding the NPCD and dSs on VIREC's Web site ([www.virec.research.med.va.gov](http://www.virec.research.med.va.gov)), along with previously published resource guides.

Second, the research staff provides technical support to scientific review panels. They review research grants, serve on review panels, and develop brief summary documents—called *VIREC Insights*—that describe databases of relevance to VA health services researchers.

A third responsibility of the research staff is disseminating information about reliability and validity of VA databases. Initial work in this area has focused on the NPCD and dSs.

Finally, the research staff has undertaken a new VIREC initiative, which involves a collaborative effort with the VHA Office of Policy and Planning's Management Science Group, to examine veterans' health care use beyond the VA. VIREC's role in this project, which focuses on veterans' use of Medicare-covered health care services, is coordinating data acquisition, analysis, and dissemination in the research community.

### Customer service

The VIREC customer service staff is responsible for responding to all telephone, internet, mail, and fax inquiries—which, at the time of this writing, totaled 448.

The customer service staff also conducts and coordinates customer satisfaction and needs assessment surveys. Based on results from these surveys, as well

as frequent customer inquiries, VIREC has begun to develop training modules and workshops. Attended primarily by researchers, these educational seminars have been conducted onsite at VIREC, and at the University of Minnesota, the Minneapolis VA Medical Center, the HSR&D Annual Meeting, and the CSP Epidemiology Research and Information Center Summer Session.

### Information and technology

The information and technology team deals with the design and maintenance of the VIREC Web site. First activated in September 1998, the Web site offers database resource guides, news on VA database developments, and discussions of analytic issues. The Web site also provides researchers with information on gaining access to databases and training programs, as well as numerous links to other data sites, both within and outside the VA. The information and technology team's future plans for the Web site include a redesign that will improve ease of navigation, incorporate a search engine function, and permit online customer profiling.

In addition to the Web site, the information and technology staff maintains an e-mail discussion group, called "HSRData," which had grown to 196 members as of September 2000. This e-mail group allows database users—especially HSR&D researchers—to exchange knowledge and information about specific databases, database fields, and methodologic issues.

### Dissemination and promotion

The dissemination and promotion service line coordinates presentations and exhibits at re-

search, trade, and VA-sponsored seminars and meetings. Such meetings—including the HSR&D Annual Meeting, the Association for Health Services Research Annual Meeting, and the VA Austin Information Technology Conference—have given VIREC staff the opportunity to show researchers and other interested parties how to find and use information on the VIREC Web site and other VA internet resources. Exhibiting also has allowed VIREC to give immediate consultation to researchers.

To raise the research community's awareness of VIREC's services, the dissemination and promotion staff also develops publications and news releases. Through all these activities, VIREC has established an important venue for both new and experienced researchers to learn more about the databases that are available to them as they address health services research questions.

### MAKING A DIFFERENCE

As an HSR&D information center devoted to consultation, documentation, and dissemination of VA database resources, VIREC focuses a great deal of effort on interacting with HSR&D researchers, information technology experts, and various VA database managers. Materials and services provided by VIREC have enhanced researchers' understanding of these databases, and in so doing, have promoted an atmosphere of information sharing across the country.

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