



Highlights of [GAO-04-566](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

VA HEALTH CARE

Improved Screening of Practitioners Would Reduce Risk to Veterans

Why GAO Did This Study

Cases of practitioners causing intentional harm to patients have raised concerns about VA's screening of practitioners' professional credentials and personal backgrounds. GAO was asked to (1) identify key VA screening requirements, (2) evaluate their adequacy, and (3) assess compliance with these screening requirements. GAO reviewed VA's policies and identified key VA screening requirements for 43 health care occupations; interviewed officials from VA, licensing boards, and certifying organizations; and randomly sampled about 100 practitioners' personnel files at each of four VA facilities we visited.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA expand its existing verification process to require that all state licenses and national certificates held by all practitioners be verified by contacting the appropriate licensing boards and national certifying organizations, expand the query of a national database to include all licensed practitioners, and fingerprint all practitioners who have direct patient care access. GAO also recommends that VA conduct oversight of its facilities to ensure their compliance with all key screening requirements. VA generally agreed with GAO's findings and will develop a detailed action plan to implement the recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-566.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7101.

What GAO Found

GAO identified key screening requirements that VA uses to verify the professional credentials and personal backgrounds of its health care practitioners. These requirements include verifying professional credentials; completing background investigations for certain practitioners, including fingerprinting to check for criminal histories; and checking national databases that contain reports of practitioners who have been professionally disciplined or excluded from federal health care programs.

GAO found adequate screening requirements for certain practitioners, such as physicians, for whom all licenses are verified by contacting state licensing boards. However, screening requirements for others, such as currently employed nurses and respiratory therapists, are less stringent because they do not require verification of all licenses and national certificates. Moreover, they require only physical inspection of the credential rather than contacting state licensing boards and national certifying organizations. Physical inspection alone can be misleading; not all credentials indicate whether they are restricted, and credentials can be forged. VA also does not require facility officials to query, for other than physicians and dentists, a national database that includes reports of disciplinary actions involving all licensed practitioners. In addition, many practitioners with direct patient care access, such as medical residents, are not required to undergo background investigations, including fingerprinting to check for criminal histories.

Four Facilities' Compliance with Existing Key VA Screening Requirements

Key screening requirements	Compliance with key screening requirements			
	Facility A	Facility B	Facility C	Facility D
Credentials of applicants verified	○	●	○	○
Credentials of employed practitioners verified	●	●	●	●
List of Excluded Individuals and Entities queried for applicants	●	○	○	○
Background investigation completed or requested for employed practitioners	●	○	○	●
Declaration for Federal Employment form completed for employed practitioners	●	●	●	●

Source: GAO analysis of VA facility files.

- Indicates a compliance rate of 90 percent or greater.
- Indicates a compliance rate of less than 90 percent.

VA has not conducted oversight of its facilities' compliance with the key screening requirements. This pattern of mixed compliance and the gaps in key VA screening requirements creates vulnerabilities to the extent that VA remains unaware of practitioners who could place patients at risk.