



Highlights of [GAO-06-648](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is responsible for determining that over 36,000 physicians working in its facilities have the appropriate professional credentials and qualifications to deliver health care to veterans. To do this, VA credentials and privileges physicians providing care at its medical facilities. In this report, GAO determined the extent to which selected VA facilities complied with (1) four VA credentialing requirements and five VA privileging requirements and (2) a requirement to submit information on paid malpractice claims. GAO also determined (3) whether VA has internal controls to help ensure the accuracy of information used to renew clinical privileges. GAO reviewed VA's policies, interviewed VA officials, and randomly sampled 17 physician files at each of seven VA medical facilities.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA provide guidance to its medical facilities on how to collect physician performance information in accordance with VA's policy that can be used to renew clinical privileges, enforce the timely submission of VA medical malpractice information, and instruct facilities to establish internal controls for privileging information. VA concurred with the findings and recommendations and provided an action plan to implement the three recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-648](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-648).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Laurie E. Ekstrand at (202) 512- 7101 or [ekstrandl@gao.gov](mailto:ekstrandl@gao.gov).

## VA HEALTH CARE

# Selected Credentialing Requirements at Seven Medical Facilities Met, but an Aspect of Privileging Process Needs Improvement

## What GAO Found

GAO found that the files reviewed at seven VA medical facilities complied with four of VA's credentialing requirements selected for review, and all but one of five privileging requirements. Credentialing is the process of verifying that a physician's professional credentials, such as state medical licenses, are valid and meet VA's requirements for employment. Privileging is the process for determining which health care services a physician is allowed to provide to veterans. For the files GAO reviewed, compliance with the fifth privileging requirement was problematic at six facilities because officials used performance information when renewing clinical privileges but collected all or most of this information through their facility's quality assurance program. This is prohibited under VA policy. In general, VA quality assurance information is confidential, according to federal law and VA policy. According to VA officials, if quality assurance information is used outside of a facility's quality assurance program, it could be used for other purposes, including litigation. The information is protected to encourage physicians to participate in quality assurance programs by reporting and discussing adverse events to help prevent such events from occurring in the future. VA has not provided guidance to help medical facilities find ways to efficiently collect performance information outside of a facility's quality assurance program. At the seventh medical facility, officials did not use performance information to renew clinical privileges, as required.

Three of the seven medical facilities did not meet VA's requirement to submit, within 60 days after being notified that the claim was paid, any information on paid VA medical malpractice claims involving facility practitioners, including physicians, to VA's Office of Medical-Legal Affairs. This office reviews the information and determines whether practitioners involved in the claims delivered substandard care, displayed professional incompetence, or engaged in professional misconduct. The office informs facilities of its determinations. When facilities do not submit all relevant VA malpractice information in a timely manner, VA medical facility officials lack complete information that would allow them to make informed decisions about the clinical privileges that their physicians should be granted.

VA has not required its medical facilities to establish internal controls to help ensure that privileging information managed by medical staff specialists—who are responsible for obtaining and verifying the information used in the credentialing and privileging processes—is accurate. One facility GAO visited did not identify 106 physicians whose privileging process had not been completed by facility officials for at least 2 years because of inaccurate information provided by the facility's medical staff specialist. As a result, these physicians were practicing at the facility without current clinical privileges. Without accurate information on the privileges that have been granted to physicians and the dates for renewing those privileges, VA medical facility officials will not know if they have failed to renew clinical privileges for any of their physicians in accordance with VA policy.