

CONGRESSMAN JAMES LANGEVIN
TESTIMONY FOR THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
Oversight hearing on medical and prosthetic research programs
in the Department of Veterans Affairs
April 10, 2003

I would like to thank Chairman Simmons, Ranking Member Rodriguez, and the entire Subcommittee on Health for convening today's hearing on biomedical research programs in the Department of Veterans Affairs. The contributions made by the Department of Veterans Affairs to medical research are substantial, high caliber, and incredibly far reaching. I want to commend VA's Rehabilitation Research and Development Services for their dedication to improving the quality of life for impaired and disabled veterans, and the nation as a whole.

The VA has shown true leadership in forming partnerships with universities and other federal agencies to ensure their research reaches veterans and others who might benefit worldwide. Recently, a project initiated by the VA in collaboration with NIH led to the development of a diaphragm pacing system. This generated national news when my friend Christopher Reeve underwent surgery to implant electrodes to stimulate muscles in his diaphragm, allowing him to breathe without a ventilator for up to 15 minutes at a time. Electrode research has the potential to tremendously benefit persons living with paralysis – not only in the area of breathing, but to prevent pressure sores, support standing and transfer after spinal cord injury and to improve walking following stroke. As a person living with spinal cord injury, I know firsthand the difference such research can make in the quality of life for an individual.

That particular project received a good deal of media coverage, but it should be noted that the VA is engaged in many more cutting edge projects happening behind the scenes. Investigators are studying the use of anabolic pharmaceuticals, including anabolic steroids, to treat secondary disabilities of spinal cord injury. Spinal cord injury, which affects more than 40,000 veterans nationwide, often is associated with problems related to muscular function, breathing, and cardiovascular health. The innovative methods being developed in the Rehabilitation Research & Development's Centers of Excellence are making a real difference in the quality of life of impaired and disabled veterans. In the process they are reaching people all over the world – the VA researchers are breaking new ground in the areas of osteoporosis, lung injury and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. They are internationally recognized leaders in HIV/AIDS research, and making important advances in the studies of prostate cancer. Indeed, this research will benefit all of us.

I also want to highlight the success the VA has had in rehabilitation and employment services for veterans. Since my arrival in Congress, I have worked to bring attention to the issues of unemployment and underemployment in the disability community. There is an unemployment rate of 70% in the disability community, and this is a population that wants to work. With some basic supports, it can be done – the VA has shown this by providing the supports to service-connected disabled veterans from vocational counseling and service-members and veterans who have recently separated from active duty. This assistance can mean the difference between a life spent in isolation and a life spent actively participating in one's community – or to look at it another way, a life spent receiving government assistance and a life spent in meaningful employment. I look forward to continued work with the VA on their vocational education counseling programs – we have much to learn from them.

From their approved rehabilitation research projects, through evaluation and technology transfer to final clinical application, the VA has truly managed to attract the brightest minds from academia, industry, and medicine. Their commitment to finding research solutions to the needs of veterans with disabilities will benefit all Americans. I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to acknowledge these critical programs and look forward to our continued work together