

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs:  
Family Assessment of Treatment**

*This unique project has created a way for the VA to improve the care that it provides to veterans near the end of life by asking veterans' families whether the veteran received the best possible care and, if not, how that care could be improved.*

**Lead Agency:**

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA),  
Veterans Health Administration (VHA)  
Philadelphia VA Medical Center

**Agency Mission:**

*"To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan."*

**Principal Investigator:**

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**General Description:**

*Family Assessment of Treatment at End-of-Life (FATE) Survey Development*

Over the past 10 years, growing attention has focused on opportunities to improve the care that older adults receive near the end of their lives. For instance, previous studies have found that symptoms like pain, nausea, constipation, and shortness of breath are very common, but that clinicians are often unable to recognize these symptoms and manage them adequately. Other studies have found that clinicians do not communicate with patients about their health care preferences, and that treatment decisions are not always consistent with those preferences. In particular, patients often receive aggressive life-sustaining treatment that is not consistent with their preferences.

The goal of this VA-funded project, the FATE study, was to develop and test a telephone survey that will allow the family members of veterans to evaluate the care that the veteran received near the end of his/her life. This survey allows family members to rate various aspects of the veteran's care including management of pain and other symptoms, and the availability of practical assistance (e.g. home care) and emotional and spiritual support. Families also are asked whether the veteran's preferences were respected, whether clinicians provided adequate information, and whether the veteran was treated with respect.

This survey is currently being implemented in eight Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN) as a measure of the quality of care that they are providing to veterans near the end of life and their families. These surveys are then used to produce quarterly

reports that are made available to VISN and hospital leaders. These reports highlight each hospital's strengths, as well as opportunities for improvement.

***Excellence:                   What makes this project exceptional?***

This is the first-ever successful project to measure and improve the quality of end of life care across an entire health care system. VA is the nation's largest integrated health care system, and offers unique opportunities both to identify opportunities for improving end-of-life care and, more importantly to identify those hospitals that provide excellent care. This project is the first of its kind to measure and improve the quality of end-of-life care on such a large scale.

***Significance:               How is this research relevant to older person, populations and/or an aging society?***

As the population ages, it will become increasingly important to ensure that we are providing the best possible care to older adults throughout their lives, and this includes the care that they receive near the end of their lives, when they are most vulnerable. Just as it is essential to preserve older adults' function and independence as long as possible, for instance, when they reach the last months of their lives, then attention turns toward maintaining comfort and preserving dignity. It is especially important to ensure that older adults receive high quality compassionate care during this period not only for the patient's sake, but also for the sake of family members.

***Effectiveness:             What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?***

This survey, which is currently being rolled out with a plan for national implementation in the VA health care system, will provide unique insights into the care that the VA is able to provide to patients near the end of life and their families. For instance, the results of these surveys have already begun to identify areas of care (e.g. pain management) that need to be improved. In addition, these results have begun to identify hospitals and nursing homes that are providing excellent care, both with respect to pain management and in all aspects of care. By understanding what makes these hospitals so successful, we are able to take the lessons learned and apply them to improve care throughout the VA health care system. Finally, this survey has begun to provide the VA with important data to guide policy. For instance, the finding that veterans receive better care from dedicated hospice or "palliative care" teams supports the VA's commitment to ensure that all veterans have access to this specialized care.

***Innovativeness:         Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?***

This is the first national effort to measure and improve the quality of care that older adults receive near the end of life across a health care system. This project offers important opportunities to identify opportunities for improvement and to identify hospitals and nursing homes whose successes can be shared.