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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-08-207T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DOD) are engaged in ongoing efforts to share medical information, which is important in helping to ensure high-quality health care for active-duty military personnel and veterans. These efforts include a long-term program to develop modernized health information systems based on computable data: that is, data in a format that a computer application can act on—for example, to provide alerts to clinicians of drug allergies. In addition, the departments are engaged in short-term initiatives involving existing systems.

GAO was asked to testify on the history and current status of the departments' efforts to share health information. To develop this testimony, GAO reviewed its previous work, analyzed documents about current status and future plans and interviewed VA and DOD officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has previously made several recommendations on this topic, including that VA and DOD develop a detailed project management plan to guide their efforts to share patient health data. While the departments agreed with these recommendations, a comprehensive overall strategy that incorporates all of the ongoing activities still needs to be implemented.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-08-207T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Valerie Melvin at (202) 512-6304 or melvinv@gao.gov.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

VA and DOD Continue to Expand Sharing of Medical Information, but Still Lack Comprehensive Electronic Medical Records

What GAO Found

For almost a decade, VA and DOD have been pursuing ways to share health information and to create comprehensive electronic medical records. However, they have faced considerable challenges in these efforts, leading to repeated changes in the focus of their initiatives and target completion dates. Currently, the two departments are pursuing both long- and short-term initiatives to share health information. Under their long-term initiative, the modern health information systems being developed by each department are to share standardized computable data through an interface between data repositories associated with each system. The repositories have now been developed, and the departments have begun to populate them with limited types of health information. In addition, the interface between the repositories has been implemented at seven VA and DOD sites, allowing computable outpatient pharmacy and drug allergy data to be exchanged. Implementing this interface is a milestone toward the departments' long-term goal, but more remains to be done. Besides extending the current capability throughout VA and DOD, the departments must still agree to standards for the remaining categories of medical information, populate the data repositories with this information, complete the development of the two modernized health information systems, and transition from their existing systems.

While pursuing their long-term effort to develop modernized systems, the two departments have also been working to share information in their existing systems. Among various short-term initiatives are a completed effort to allow the one-way transfer of health information from DOD to VA when service members leave the military, as well as ongoing demonstration projects to exchange limited data at selected sites. One of these projects, which builds on the one-way transfer capability, developed an interface between certain existing systems that allows a two-way view of current data on patients receiving care from both departments. VA and DOD are now expanding the sharing of additional medical information by using this interface to link other systems and databases. The departments have also established ad hoc processes to meet the immediate need to provide data on severely wounded service members to VA's polytrauma centers, which specialize in treating such patients. These processes include manual workarounds (such as scanning paper records) that are generally feasible only because the number of polytrauma patients is small. While these multiple initiatives and ad hoc processes have facilitated degrees of data sharing, they nonetheless highlight the need for continued efforts to integrate information systems and automate information exchange. At present, it is not clear how all the initiatives are to be incorporated into an overall strategy focused on achieving the departments' goal of comprehensive, seamless exchange of health information.