To paraphrase the great coach Vince Lombardi, providing world class service to our Veterans is… “not a sometime thing, it is an all the time thing. You don't do things right once in a while, you do them right all the time.”

By way of introduction, I am Ron Johnson, the new director of the McGuire VA Medical Center. I am both happy and proud to serve employees and Veterans, and I look forward to meeting each of you in the coming weeks and months.

World Class Service is a concept that is very important to our VA Secretary, the Honorable Robert Wilkie, and to me. Also, I trust and believe that it is a concept that is just as important to you. As a first step, offering World Class Service is as simple as greeting somebody with a smile and a great attitude.

Furthermore, you must act on meeting the needs of those you serve – whether that be a Veteran, a Veteran’s family member, a VA stakeholder or a fellow employee. In short, anybody that you serve deserves nothing less than your best!

Like you, I am here to serve. And to the Veterans who come to McGuire and its affiliated community-based outpatient clinics, they have my personal assurance that our team will give them nothing less than our best – all day, every day. As a first step along this journey, ask how you can provide World Class Service to those you serve. Not only will they be receptive, but you will be energized to deliver on your stated commitment.

J. Ronald Johnson, FACHE
Medical Center Director

Cover photo: Air Force Veteran Terence McManus walks down the hall with the assistance of a ReWalk exoskeleton as Dr. Ashraf Gorgey observes the Vet and device working together. Gorgey serves as director of McGuire’s Spinal Cord Injury and Disorder research program.

Back photo: Joseph and Peggy Allen take part in the Community Living Center’s Mardi Gras event.
VET'S DIET PROVIDES RESULTS, REDUCES PAIN

Do nutrition labels on the food we buy really tell us everything about our food?

Well, like Marine Veteran Grace Barr, 48, of northern Dinwiddie found, it depends on what you’re looking for.

“I knew how to read the nutrition labels, how to look for calories, fat and proteins, but I never knew how to read the label to look at the ingredients part,” said Barr.

And would someone who suffers from chronic inflammatory pain, like Barr, want to know exactly what ingredients would help lessen that pain? Of course.

“I really don’t like or want to take medications that aren’t absolutely necessary, so if there is some other way to help me deal with the pain, then I want to know about it,” said Barr.

Thanks to an innovative approach to pain management through diet, the eight-week Anti-Inflammatory Eating Program, part of the Veterans Integrated Pain (VIP) Center at McGuire VA Medical Center, has provided Barr with significant pain relief.

The VIP Center uses self-management techniques to break the pain cycle and turn around someone’s overall health. Besides the Anti-Inflammatory Eating Program, VIP offers wellness initiatives such as acupuncture, biofeedback, mindfulness and meditation, Qi Gong, and Tai Chi.

For Barr, the lessening of pain was indisputable.

“When I started, I was about 8 to 8 1/2 on the pain scale,” said Barr. “About midway through the program, I was at about 6 to 6 1/2. At about the same time, I started noticing more energy as well.”

Barr’s pain had seriously cut into her walking and workout regimen. But by the end of the class, she was back on track.

“I’m really active – I like to walk and go to the gym, but pain really made it unbearable,” said Barr. But somewhere around the middle of the program, I was able to walk five days straight for three miles each day.”

McGuire VA Registered Dietitian Ka Wong, who works with the Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center and VIP center, explains the science behind the program.

“Anti-Inflammatory Eating is an evidence-based nutrition intervention targeted at reducing chronic inflammation in the body,” said Wong. “When I was first tasked to design a nutrition program for VIP

Veteran Grace Barr, who went through the eight-week Anti-Inflammatory Eating Program at McGuire’s Veterans Integrated Pain (VIP) Center, displays the food that reflects her new way of eating. To the left is her ‘green smoothie’ made from alkaline water, kale, pineapples, cucumbers, flax seed and sweetened with honey. In the container in the middle of the photo, are boiled eggs and avocado slices – part of her ‘whole food’ based approach. Her lunch bag reminds her of the tenets of good nutrition.

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four years ago, I chose this diet based on research because many of our Veterans with chronic pain also have other co-morbidities. I wanted to address their chronic pain with a whole health approach rather than just targeting pain or at one disease state.”

Wong noted chronic inflammation has been shown to be the root cause of many medical conditions including atherosclerosis, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, obesity, Alzheimer’s, depression and chronic pain.

The changes in diet are supposed to be gradual, but lifelong. For Barr, who suffers from migraines since an auto accident and lower back pain from her active duty service, it encouraged a whole other way of looking at food and eating.

“When I shop there are certain foods that I like, especially pasta,” said Barr. “I’ve had regular, whole wheat and then I tried the (plant based) pasta. I found out it is a different taste, but I didn’t mind trying something new. It actually tastes pretty good.”

Other changes Barr made included switching from boxed and bagged food to their natural and fresh states. For example, instead of buying frozen chicken wings, she buys fresh chicken and makes wings that way. Barr also started eating a wider variety of vegetables and added more fruit to her diet as well.

The other part of the Anti-Inflammatory Eating Program is mindfulness eating. Barr explains what that is:

“So, before I take a bite I look at my plate to see how colorful it is – are there different colors represented or is it one color or bland looking?” said Barr. “Then when I take a bite, I want to taste and savor the food rather than just wolf it down. What this does is trigger your mind and stomach to say that you’re feeling full.”

And even though weight loss isn’t the main goal of the program, Barr lost seven pounds.

And to top it off, Barr’s family went with her on the journey, experiencing new foods and ways of eating.

Wong said people must to set realistic goals for themselves and that each person’s body will respond in different ways.

“One thing people need to realize is that this is not a magic diet,” said Wong. “But Grace exemplifies what the program is all about: making realistic changes that last a lifetime for the benefit of her health. And when you see the results, it’s hard to go back to the old ways.” •

Students from Kaohsiung Medical University visited the Richmond VA Medical Center in March in partnership with Virginia Commonwealth University. Approximately 35 healthcare administration students from Taiwan learned more about American medicine and medical practices. This year marks the seventh year the group has visited Richmond VA.
Say you’re a Veteran coming in for a procedure that will require anesthesia and someone to observe you for the rest of the day at home.

Without transportation from a family member or friend the McGuire VA Medical Center’s Social Work Service steps in with a unique program to help Veterans who fit these criteria.

Toni Jones heads up the Medical Companion Program. The program, officially adopted in 2016, provides certified nursing assistants that can both transport Veterans, observe them and get help in case there are complications from the procedure.

The main goal, said Jones, is to prevent admissions or readmissions while keeping Veterans safe. The medical criteria for eligibility are either the judgments of the provider or the type of anesthesia used.

“If the patient is having an outpatient procedure and drive themselves and have no way to get home, or they have no one at home to watch them, they may have to be admitted,” said Jones. “So, in this situation they will be referred to me, and I will assess them to determine if they have any supports that could provide assistance they may not have considered.”

If the Veteran doesn’t have a ride or someone at home, Jones will work with outside home health aide services to arrange a qualified companion. Jones estimates she does around 15 to 20 companion program consultations a month.

Navy Veteran Landy Emory, 80, of Hopewell, Virginia, has used the medical companion program twice, once in late fall of last year and again in January. He has been very pleased with the program and his treatment at McGuire.

“She was very nice to me,” said Emory of his companion. “She drove me here for my colonoscopy and waited for the procedure to end and then took me home.”

While at his home, Emory’s medical companion made sure he was settled and took care of some paperwork for him.

If Veterans live close to the hospital, a companion provides transportation, said Jones. If there is a family member at home to look after them, the companion ensures they are well informed before leaving.

If a Veteran lives farther than a 30-minute drive from McGuire, Jones arranges lodging at a nearby hotel. The companion would take them to the hotel and observe them there.

There are a number of procedures that qualify Veterans for consideration of the companion program.

Jones says she tries to bring the program to Veterans as much as possible, and she takes the time to do follow-up calls to make sure the medical companions were a good fit.

“One of my aides had a Veteran with low vision issues,” said Jones. “While the aide was providing service, she helped the Veteran by reading his paperwork to him and also volunteered to help him outside the companion program.”

Jones’ enthusiasm for medical companions has led her to help other VAs to start their own program.

“Right now, I am working with nine different VA hospitals to continue to help them set up medical companion programs of their own,” said Jones. “I get really excited when I see it start somewhere else.” •
ANNN Gulyas is the new program director for the Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center at McGuire VA Medical Center. She brings over 25 years of experience managing rehabilitation services across the continuum of care for neurological and orthopedic injuries.

While serving on various state committees in New Jersey, she initiated the first state Tri-Alliance between occupational, physical and speech therapies to promote interdisciplinary support and exchange information.

Clinically, she is a speech-language pathologist with board certification in swallowing and swallowing disorders. She is published in dysphagia journals and has presented at the state and national levels.

She received her undergraduate degree in speech and hearing at Miami University and earned her master’s degree in speech-language pathology at Kent State University.

Gulyas said Helen Keller was her inspiration to get into the speech and hearing field.

“She was a childhood fascination of mine, and I read every book I could about her,” said Gulyas.

Gulyas decided to specialize in dysphagia (swallowing disorders) after completing her master’s.

“I was working on my clinical fellow year and was fortunate enough to take the first class offered on dysphagia at Northwestern University,” said Gulyas. “I was taught by the dysphagia guru of our field and fell in love with it.”

Her current dysphagia projects include working with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) on updating practice standards for managing swallowing in Duchenne’s muscular dystrophy. In addition to administrative and clinical experience, Ann’s background includes adjunct instructor at William Patterson University in New Jersey, where she taught dysphagia disorders.

A highlight of her career has been participating in a medical mission to Ghana, Africa with the group Unified for Global Healing.

“When our mission was ending, I did not want to leave,” Gulyas said. “What I took away from it was that the people we treated with limited resources were not poor in spirit … they knew what was important to focus on.”

Ann has a deep respect for our nation’s military and noted her father’s service in World War II.

Gulyas is new to the VA and the Richmond area but is impressed by what she’s seen so far.

“The hospital is quite impressive and appears to work very well,” said Gulyas. “I am very fortunate to be here.

“Richmond appears to offer a lot but on a small scale,” she continued. “I prefer the urban life which Richmond has plenty of. It seems to be a mix of the north and the south, which I appreciate.” •
Congratulations to Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation for their recent 3-year accreditation from the Commission on the Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities! Keep up the great work!

**Employee Health**

Hand washing and sanitizing are great ways to protect yourself, but people are bound to one day catch the common cold. At McGuire, there is a team whose main goal is to take care of the hardworking staff when illness or minor injury strikes.

Meet the Employee Health team: made up of two doctors, one nurse practitioner, one licensed practical nurse and one advanced medical support assistant. The team dedicates themselves daily to helping their fellow co-workers. Some examples include: vision tests for individuals who provide transportation to Veterans, annual exams for police officers and groundskeepers, pre-employment physicals and more.

One of their biggest duties is administrating immunizations such as the flu shot, to medical center staff.

“It’s full circle,” shared Ramona Howard, nurse practitioner. “We help the staff, the staff helps the Veterans, and the Vets are why we are all here.”

Linda Barnett, licensed practical nurse, said “mental and physical health is key to making sure we come to work and give the day the best we have. It’s important to stop and make sure you’re okay. If you’re sick or just need a listening ear, we are here.”

Employee health strives to ensure all staff understand their health is important, and managing it is a must. Here is a special thank you to Employee Health for taking care of us.

*From left: Lisa Thanjan, MD; Stephanie Hawkins, AMSA; John Prince, MD; Ramona Howard, NP; Linda Barnett, LPN.*