

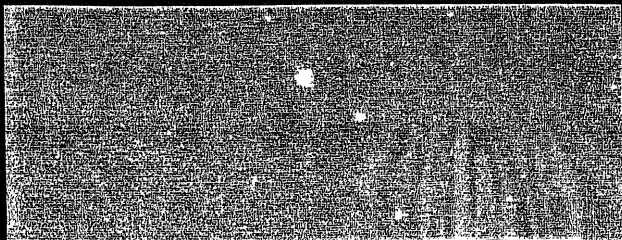
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# Worlds Apart

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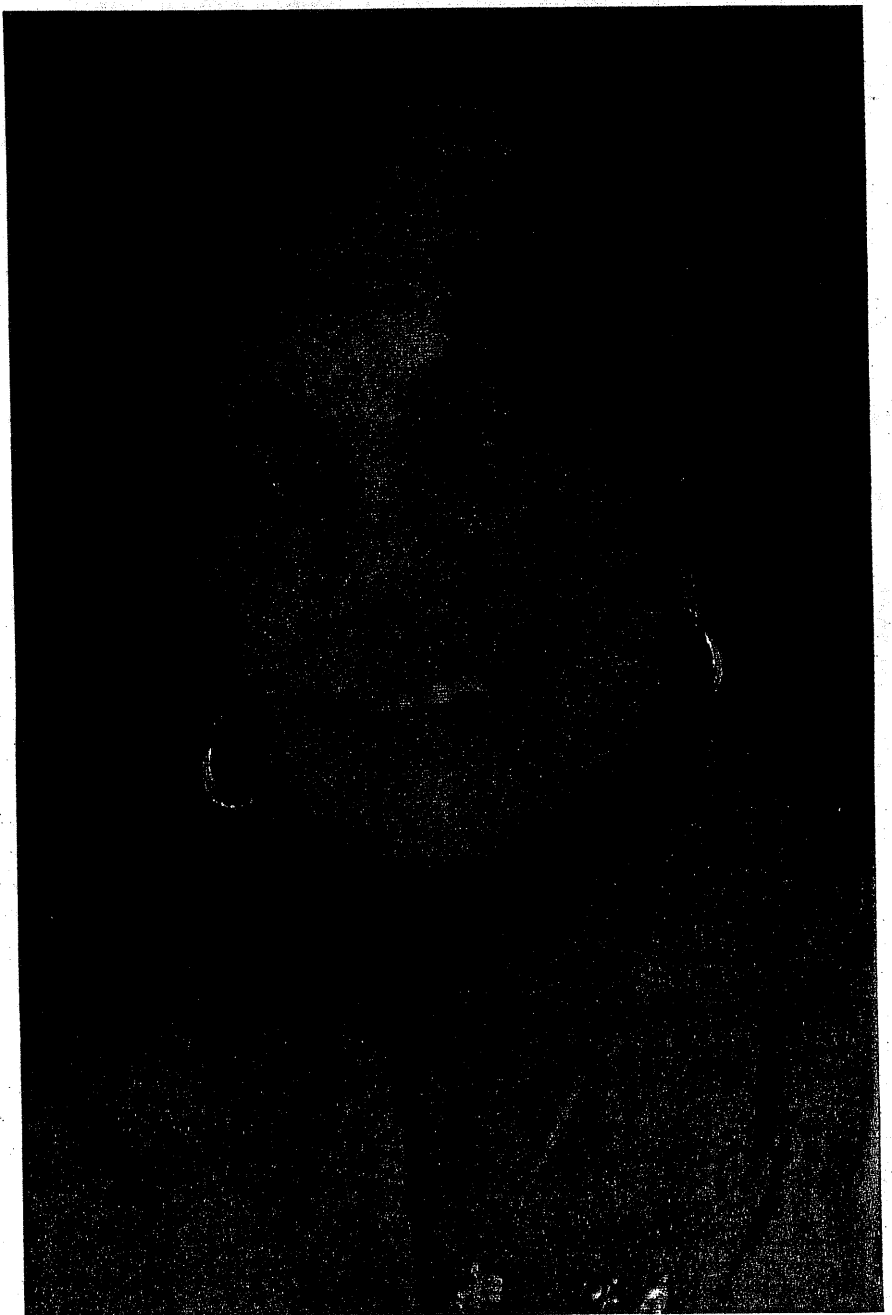
# Loyal to VHA

*Dr. Omega Silva  
defends the  
system's role  
in American  
health care.*

BY JAMES V. CARROLL

**D**r. Omega C. Logan Silva has been a health-care professional for more than 40 years. Most of those years she worked in the Veterans Affairs medical system. She currently serves on The American Legion Veterans' Planning and Coordinating Committee.

Silva was introduced to the Veterans Health Administration system in 1964. As a second-year medical student at Howard University, she was hired by Washington Veterans Medical Center to enter medical data into the hospital's new state-of-the-art computer system. She earned \$5 per hour. Three years later, Silva was one of the first postgraduate physicians to serve an internship at VA.



Silva is, and always has been, fiercely loyal to VA. She is proud of her association and is concerned that an ever-dwindling veteran population might doom the 56-year-old veterans' health-care system. She freely admits problems exist at some centers, but she also believes medical education, training and research will suffer irrevocably if VHA is eliminated or folded into the Department of Health and Human Services.

VHA is too important a piece of America's health-care mosaic to lose, too much of a national treasure, she says.

Silva is the first African-American woman research associate at VHA, as well as VHA's first African-American clinical investigator. She has published more than 200 articles, book chapters and abstracts mostly on the endocrine system, including the hormone calcitonin. Silva is the former chief of the diabetic clinic and served as assistant chief of endocrinology at the VA Medical Center in Washington until her retirement in 1996.

Silva served as secretary-treasurer of the National Association of VA Physicians and a member of the first VA Advisory Committee on Women Veterans. She is immediate past president of the American Medical Women's Association and professor emeritus of medicine at George Washington University.

**THE AMERICAN LEGION MAGAZINE:** What is the purpose of VHA?

**OMEGA LOGAN SILVA:** The mission of VHA ensures that health-care needs of America's military veterans are met by providing primary care, specialized care and other special support services to our country's men and women veterans. VHA also has a secondary mission to provide backup care for military personnel. VHA also can play an important role in caring for civilians in case of a domestic catastrophic disaster, such as a terrorist attack.

Dr. Omega Silva, a member of The American Legion Veterans' Planning and Coordinating Committee, says VHA care is "second to none." *James V. Carroll*

*"Since its inception more than 50 years ago, efforts have been made to privatize VHA, to outsource parts or get rid of it altogether. But the quality of America's health care depends upon a strong VHA."*

**TALM:** How does VHA rate among medical-care providers in America?

**OLS:** It is second to none. Military veterans receive some of the best medical care in the world. Health-care providers of VHA serve millions of veterans - many with complicated multisystem diseases - offering compassionate state-of-the-art treatment in a cost-effective manner.

**TALM:** What other reasons make VHA important?

**OLS:** Medical schools share faculty and hospital staff with VHA and vice versa. These very productive relationships are not well known, but they are integral and an absolute and necessary part of medical education.

VHA is affiliated with 107 medical schools, 55 dental schools and 1,200 other educational institutions throughout the country. It helps train not only medical students, physicians and dentists, but pharmacists, nurses, social workers, rehabilitation therapists, psychologists and counselors. A majority of U.S. physicians and many foreign medical graduates have received some or all of their education and training at VHA hospitals or clinics.

VHA training becomes more important to future health-care professionals at a time when medical schools are selling their hospitals and more physicians are working as employees in managed care and health-maintenance organizations.

Next time you visit your doctor, ask if he or she received any

training at a VHA hospital or clinic. Chances are good they did.

**TALM:** Some critics propose to fold VHA into the Department of Health and Human Services. What is your view?

**OLS:** I think it would be positively stupid to contemplate getting rid of something that has been built so beautifully to take care of our nation's veterans. Since its inception more than 50 years ago, efforts have been made to privatize VHA, to outsource parts or get rid of it altogether. But the quality of America's health care depends upon a strong VHA.

**TALM:** What do you think would happen if VHA were dismantled?

**OLS:** Medical education in America would collapse. People don't realize that. How many managed-care doctors do you think have the time to teach an intern, resident or student? Even though many of them are perfectly capable and would like to do it, they don't have the time. It's impossible for managed-care physicians to take care of a patient every 15 minutes, complete required paperwork and then find time to teach. There are too few hours in a day.

**TALM:** Has VHA made other significant medical contributions?

**OLS:** Many modern technologies exist today as a result of discoveries by VA medical researchers. These medical advances have benefited all Americans, not just veterans.

Research by Dr. Edward Freis on long-term treatment of hypertension was undertaken many years ago utilizing the VA Cooperative Studies Plan. His research has helped many people worldwide achieve normal blood pressures and avoid long-term complications and early deaths associated with the disease.

The development of an analytical technique that is the basis for thousands of laboratory tests worldwide, is the accomplishment of VHA physicist Dr. Rosalyn Yalow, who received the Nobel Prize in 1977. Using that concept in the laboratory of Dr. Kenneth Becker, I - along with another chemist,

Dr. Richard Snyder - developed an RIA for calcitonin, a hormone from the thyroid gland that lowers serum calcium among other actions. Using this RIA, I was able to study the hormone in patients with many diseases. Using the technique, I was able to prove that calcitonin was produced and secreted by oat-cell cancer of the lung.

VHA helped develop the CAT scan and cardiac pacemaker. The first liver transplant in the world was performed by a VHA surgeon-researcher. VHA clinical trials established the effectiveness of new treatments for tuberculosis, schizophrenia and high blood pressure. The "Seattle Foot," developed in VHA allows people with amputations to run and jump. Recently, an implantable insulin pump was developed that offers diabetic patients an alternative way to control their disease. VHA has become a world leader in researching aging, women's health, AIDS, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental-health issues, and VHA has few peers in the field of prosthetics. The list of discoveries and accomplishments is a long one, indeed.

I also want to mention VA's record-keeping and patient-tracking computer system. It's a first of its kind and remains more advanced and integrated than most health-care systems today. VA's medical computer system enables physicians, nurses and other health-care professionals to pull up a patient's medical file at any VA hospital or clinic.

**TALM:** What is the greatest threat to VA?

**OLS:** Relevance. Organizations such as The American Legion have long been strong advocates

*"Many modern technologies exist today as a result of discoveries by VA medical researchers. These medical advances have benefited all Americans, not just veterans."*

and have exacted congressional support for VA and its health-care system. But today, there are fewer veterans to keep watch over Congress. And as the military continues to reduce its force size, there will be fewer veterans to seek VA health care in the future. To maintain its leadership role in medical education and research, VHA must remain viable.

**TALM:** Do you have suggestions to help preserve VHA?

**OLS:** Thought should be given to expanding the VHA health-care system so that more veterans and their families can avail themselves of its many advantages. We must find ways to work toward that goal.

A logical first step would be to permit eligible veterans to use their Medicare benefits to pay for VHA health care. Current law forbids the practice. It doesn't seem equitable to me given the fact VHA can take care of two Medicare patients for the price it takes to care for one patient outside VHA.

VHA delivers some of the best health care in the world. More Medicare-eligible veterans would use VHA services if they did not have to pay for it out of their

own pockets. Veterans should have the right to choose VHA health care without being penalized. It is unfair.

**TALM:** The government promises all veterans access to VHA health care, right?

**OLS:** Yes, but some veterans who do not have service-connected injury or illness are required to pay for care from VHA the same as if they received care outside the system. These veterans might have out-of-pocket co-payments, but VHA typically collects the remainder from veterans' insurance carriers. Medicare-eligible nonservice-connected veterans, on the other hand, are not allowed to use their Medicare benefits, which they paid for, because VHA is not permitted to bill Medicare for VHA services. It makes no sense.

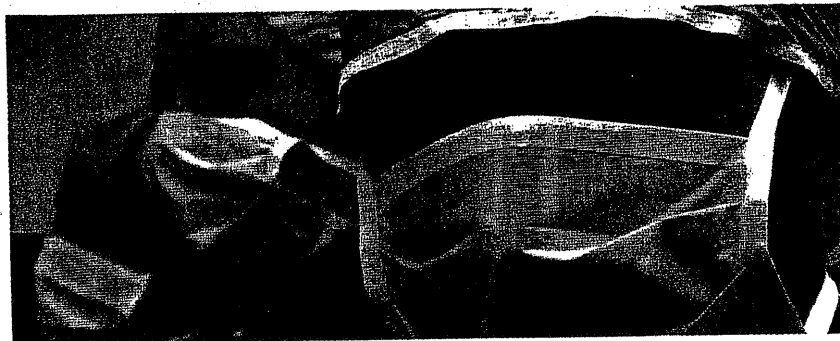
Permitting VHA to bill Medicare for health-care treatment to Medicare-eligible veterans would be beneficial in a number of ways. It would allow veterans to choose VHA without penalty. It would save tax dollars. And it would create an infusion of dollars to VHA that could be used to augment existing education and research programs and to enhance maintenance to physical structures.

A vibrant VHA is an essential piece in America's health-care system. Who knows what new procedures, treatments, technologies or cures might go undiscovered if VHA is dismantled or folded into some other government health-care program? I don't. I do know, however, what procedures, treatments, technologies and cures exist as a direct or indirect result of VHA research. Medical care is the quality product it is today in no small part because of VHA.

We cannot afford to lose such a national treasure. In my view, the future of quality health care in America - indeed, the world - is linked irrevocably to the survival of VHA. □

*James V. Carroll is an assistant editor at The American Legion Magazine.*

*Article design: King Doxsee*



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