

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

April 28, 2015

The Honorable Robert McDonald  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420-0001

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing to restate our ongoing concerns about the Office of Nursing Services (ONS) proposed "VHA Nursing Handbook" and its provisions that would change surgical anesthesia standards within VA facilities. We urge the retention of the current "Anesthesia Service Handbook" as the appropriate guidance document for anesthesia services in VA.

In our previous correspondence, we have conveyed our concerns about the patient safety implications of the proposed changes to anesthesia standards in VA. Specifically, the proposed Nursing Handbook would supersede the "Anesthesia Service Handbook," a policy document that provides for anesthesia in "a team fashion" (a physician and nurse working together to provide care) and move to a nurse-only model of anesthesia care delivery. We have questioned whether such a model is appropriate for a patient population with poor health status such that served by VA. We believe that the well-being and safety of veterans should be of paramount consideration when changes to health related procedures and policies are considered.

As you know, with our support the FY '15 Continuing Resolution and Omnibus Appropriations Act included language asking VA to include relevant stakeholders in discussions related to this policy and asking VA to work to avoid advancing a Nursing Handbook that would conflict with handbooks "already in place." Specifically, the language provided that:

"Nursing handbook. -- The Committee understands that the VHA Nursing Handbook is currently under review. The Committee encourages that the VHA seek input from internal VA program offices and external professional stakeholders, prior to possible regulatory action and submission to the Under Secretary for Health for final approval. The Committee believes all possible outreach efforts should be used to communicate the proposed changes, to gather public comment, and to collaborate with Congress, stakeholders, VA nursing staff, and external organizations. Finally, the Committee requests that the VHA ensure that any changes to handbooks within the VHA do not conflict with other handbooks already in place within the VHA."

It is our hope that VA will work to comply with the intent of this bipartisan and bicameral language by working to ensure that the Nursing Handbook has no provisions related to anesthesia services that would conflict with the Anesthesia Service Handbook.

We believe any changes to the VHA Nursing Handbook should maintain the highest standards of anesthesia care in surgical settings. We remain deeply concerned by the proposal to remove physician anesthesiologists from our veterans' anesthesia care teams and implement a nurse-only standard. We urge compliance with the

recent report language and the preservation of the current Anesthesia Service Handbook as the policy directive guiding anesthesia care for our veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dan Benishek".

DAN BENISHEK, M.D.  
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Julia Brownley".

JULIA BROWNLEY  
Member of Congress