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Vet care `unacceptable'

The Department of Veterans Affairs is still clueless. A new report says the VA repeatedly overstates how quickly it cares for veterans and understates how many are waiting for care. Under pressure to improve performance and show faster care, some VA hospital workers have essentially "gamed" the scheduling process to give the appearance of better care, the report said.

The results, released this week, are shameful but not surprising. Too many at the VA seem to focus on appearing to help veterans, rather than making sure veterans really get help.

That attitude starts at the top. That was clear in comments from VA Secretary James Nicholson, who made a brief visit to Charlotte in June. Mr. Nicholson spent his short time here not assuring veterans and others that the VA was aggressively tackling concerns and problems at its facilities but defending care as "really good." He said complaints are just a matter of "semantics" in how some data is being conveyed.

Mr. Nicholson was wrong, and many veterans let him and the Bush administration know it. Amid criticism, he announced in July he would step down in October.

Unfortunately, that hasn't stopped VA leaders from clinging to the "semantics" defense. In a four-page response to the recent report, the VA challenged the investigators' methods and countered that their own patient surveys show 85 percent of those polled say they get appointments when needed. "When needed," of course, is not the same as in a timely fashion or even in the time-frame the VA reports for the stated record.

In fact, investigators analyzed 700 medical appointments scheduled last October at 10 VA medical centers and interviewed 113 VA schedulers. Their conclusion? "The accuracy of ... reported waiting times could not be relied on and the ... waiting lists were incomplete."

The report calls into question not only the effectiveness, but also the integrity, of the agency. The chairman of the Senate VA committee, Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, called the findings "simply not acceptable."

At least one official gets it right.