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VA hospitals offer new medical benefits

Medical benefits for veterans with service-connected disabilities are now entitled to new medical benefits at Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals.

The Veterans Benefits Health Care Act of 1976 expands and clarifies medicare services provided by VA and extended the services to more veterans.

New medical benefits for veterans with a service-connected disability rated 50 percent or more may be treated at a VA outpatient facility for any disability. Frequent outpatient or ambulatory care for any non-service-connected medical problem had been limited to veterans with a service-connected disability of 80 percent or more.

Such programs as outpatient care, rehabilitation, nursing home care, state homes, and dental care were restricted in some ways by the new legislation and expanded in others.

ONE EXPANSION was a broadened definition of medical services to include rehabilitative services, family mental health services when it relates to treatment or training of veterans with a service-connected disability and a clear definition of when dental services may be furnished.

VA's civilian services were extended to the dependent survivors of veterans with a permanent and total service-connected disability who die of a non-service-connected cause.

Some of the changes brought about by the new law include:

- Veterans with 50 percent or more service-connected disability now have the eligibility for outpatient care formerly reserved for those disabled by 80 percent or more.
- Inpatient care is limited to 12 months except when a longer period is approved by the administrator as being necessary to complete treatment.
- Ambulatory care provided for the purpose of disposing of the need for hospitalization for arm or service-connected disability is limited to the extent that the services are available at VA facilities.
- Outpatient dental services for non-service-connected conditions are authorized only when necessary to complete work that was begun during a period of hospitalization.
- Payment of travel costs of veterans reporting to VA facilities for treatment of non-service-connected disabilities primarily is limited to those unable to defray the costs of such transportation.

THE NEW LAW covers a clarification of therapeutic and rehabilitation activities. A expanded work therapy program permits contracts with private industry or other sources to provide therapy with pay for patients and members.

The legislation covers the issue of patient rights and the concept of informed consent. Confidentiality of certain medical records is maintained. The law requires information on the admission and treatment of veterans who are alcohol or drug abusers in providing medical care in VA facilities.

The new legislation establishes provisions for medical service to veterans with first priority given to veterans with service-connected disabilities.

In recognition of the increasing age of veterans, the new legislation requires a study to determine the short and long range direction of hospital and medical programs.

A study will also be made of alternatives to institutional care, changes in treatment and education and training of appropriate health care personnel.

Research is planned to improve genetic care and meet architectural, transportation and environmental needs of the aged.

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