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The Case Against Anesthesiologist Assistants in the VA and TRICARE

The AANA is making its views known to the appropriate officials at the Pentagon and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) about the pending proposals to add anesthesiologist assistants (AAs) as new anesthesia providers. The AANA has initiated an aggressive grassroots campaign to ensure that CRNAs have the opportunity to comment to both agencies as well as to their members of congress. To date, the AANA Washington Office has received copies of hundreds of letters from concerned CRNAs.

The AANA has also contacted Congress about these ill-advised proposals.

Unfortunately there appears to be no formal rulemaking process at the VA. We have been informed that Michael Bishop, MD, director, Central Office Anesthesia Services, has signaled his intention to include AAs as part of the revised *Anesthesia Handbook*. The AANA has met with VA officials to advise them of our concerns. It appears that some senior VA officials have been under the incorrect impression that there is a shortage of crisis proportions in the VA. The AANA has advised them that actually, there is only an 8 percent vacancy rate.

As for TRICARE, a proposed rule would permit AAs to practice there as well. The U.S. Department of Defense has proposed authorizing AAs as providers of anesthesia care under the TRICARE health plan for military personnel and dependents, in a proposed rule published in the *Federal Register* April 3 (68 FR 16247, 4/3/2003).

"The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) already recognizes anesthesiologist's assistants as authorized providers (42 CFR 410.69)," the proposed rule says. "We propose to recognize anesthesiologist's assistants as authorized providers under the same conditions applied by CMS. That is: (1) They must work only under the direct supervision of an anesthesiologist; (2) They must comply with all applicable requirements of state law and be licensed, where applicable, by the state in which they practice, and (3) They must have completed the appropriate educational requirements."

- The proposed rule is open for public comment through June 2, 2003.

Read the proposed rule at
http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fedreg/a030403c.html

The AANA has advised the agencies as well as members of Congress that there are serious problems about using AAs in the VA and in TRICARE. AAs are not required to have any healthcare training prior to their entrance to AA school. They may sit for their certification examination after 18 months, or six months prior to their graduation from the program. In addition, after 30 years there are only two AA schools in the entire country (Emory University and Case Western University), and they are only specifically recognized in five states.

AAs cannot work alone without an anesthesiologist, likely requiring both agencies to dramatically increase their hiring of anesthesiologists. In addition, there is no opportunity to deploy an AA, because that would essentially require the deployment of an anesthesiologist as well.

CRNAs Lobby on Capitol Hill at Mid-Year Assembly

More than 400 CRNAs and student nurse anesthetists lobbied their U.S. representatives and senators on Capitol Hill the week of April 30 as part of the AANA Mid-Year Assembly.

With the most robust attendance seen in years, nurse anesthetists carried to legislators the message of "Patient Safety First." In promoting patient safety, CRNAs advocated opposition to including AAs in the military's TRICARE health plan or in the VA health system, and support for CRNA education funding, medical malpractice liability reform, and patient safety outcomes reporting legislation.

CRNAs also heard addresses from House Majority Whip Roy Blunt (R-MO) and Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D-ND), a member of the House Ways and Means Committee. They also heard remarks from CMS Administrator Tom Scully, as well as from nationally syndicated columnist and American Enterprise Institute Scholar Norm Ornstein. A record number of CRNAs joined in the annual CRNA-PAC cruise and silent auction on the Potomac, helping to raise resources for keeping a strong voice in Washington.



Assembly keynote speaker Dr. Norman Ornstein (center), scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, visited with AANA President-elect Tom McKibban, CRNA, MS (l), and AANA Director of Federal Government Affairs David Hebert, JD (r).

House Majority Whip Blunt Earns AANA Healthcare Leadership Award

The 2003 AANA Healthcare Leadership Award was presented April 30 in Washington to Rep. Roy Blunt (R-MO), a key member of the congressional leadership and a strong advocate for CRNAs and better healthcare.

"Every American wants a strong Medicare program, excellent and affordable healthcare, and safe anesthesia care at the time it's needed," said AANA President Rodney Lester, CRNA, PhD, in presenting the award. "As a leader in Congress, as a representative from rural America, and as an educator, Congressman Blunt works for safe, affordable, and excellent healthcare for every American. He more than works; he succeeds."

Read the AANA statement on Rep. Blunt's award at <http://www.aana.com/press/2003/043003.asp>

AANA President-elect McKibban Testifies Before House Health Panel

The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, HHS and Education heard from AANA President-elect Tom McKibban, CRNA, MS, on May 7, as he testified in favor of funding for nurse anesthesia education.

Accredited CRNA schools have historically received about \$3 million annually in grants to expand and strengthen their programs and to provide traineeships to second-year student nurse anesthetists. But with advanced practice nurse education funding being cut from \$60 million to \$50 million in the 2003 budget, and its proposed reduction by nearly half again in the 2004 budget, McKibban made the case that CRNA education makes good healthcare and economic sense. 🏠



At the Mid-Year Assembly, House Majority Whip Roy Blunt (R-MO) (left), winner of the 2003 AANA Healthcare Leadership Award, met with AANA Executive Director Jeffery Beutler, CRNA, MS (center), and AANA President Rodney Lester, CRNA, PhD.