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Posted: November 15, 2009 08:39 PM

Defense Health Board Subcommittee: DoD Misrepresented to Congress Their Report on Walter Reed Construction

So said Kenneth W. Kizer, M.D., M.P.H., Chairman of the National Capitol Region BRAC Health Systems Advisory Subcommittee in a 12 November 2009 letter to the acting Chairman of the Defense Health Board. Doctor Kizer wrote the Subcommittee reaction to a Department of Defense response to Congress concerning "Achieving World Class, An Independent Review of the Design Plans for the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and the Fort Belvoir Community Hospital" .

The contents were not surprising; the frankness was. Year after year members of the military family voiced concerns which DoD ignored. Now the accuracy of their warnings is recognized. Construction of the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC) is a debacle. There is at least a 1.5 BILLION dollar cost overrun but that is not even the issue at this point.

The issue is:

"The Committee wishes to reaffirm its previous perspective that addressing the identified deficiencies of the current WRNMMC design plans will not necessarily ensure the new facility will be world class, but it is a certainty that it will not be world class if needed corrective actions are not taken in a timely manner."

This is failure on a massive scale and in direct language seldom seen in the DC bureaucracy.

Damage to the healthcare of our troops and their families continues unabated. Last week, I wandered through three areas of Walter Reed all of which will disappear or be severely downsized. Ward 46 Surgical Intensive Care Unit (SICU) is a leading edge unit recently redone at major expense. The area appears like the bridge of a starship. The highly skilled staff said that, to the best of their knowledge, the SICU was not being replaced at the new Walter Reed Bethesda location and would simply disappear. Then I walked through Walter Reed's leading edge wounded warrior physical therapy center. This is the area you see on the news. There is nothing like it anywhere. It is an amazing collage of sophisticated regimes and equipment specialized to treat missing limbs and serious brain trauma and injury. This new facility opened during Bush's last term is being broken up and dispersed throughout Bethesda according to reports from staff. Finally, I visited a transportation module surrounded by screens. It was a simulator that is used to allow the physically handicapped and/or traumatized patient adapt to driving vehicles in the US again and to determine the best handicap set up for their individual needs. Incredibly, this too will "disappear" in the move to Bethesda. I asked a sharp, enthusiastic captain her thoughts. She said this simulator is worn out and should disappear but not the program. New, much more capable systems are available and ready for production if there is funding. I guess there isn't. We are losing this capability.

Dr. Kizer's letter highlighted just a few of the major issues facing the WRNMMC. We heard it all before from inadequate surgery units to two person rooms which spread infection. Also, there is incredibly poor placement of critical support facilities such as the world class pathology capabilities which were to retain the expertise of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology.

Two weeks ago I wrote:

"...In essence, the Department of Defense kicked the can far into future budget cycles. In the meantime our troops and their families will be deprived of Walter Reed and shoehorned into a facility that may not even achieve state of the art for modern medical centers. Congress should halt further construction as soon as possible. Guarantee the needs of our military are properly met and tax payers dollars not squandered further. As an "Air Force guy" with no axe to grind, DoD should assign the Bethesda project lead to the US Army as the Navy clearly is not up to the task."

I was right. The statement is even more correct now. Why DoD continues to confuse and to mislead, not just congress, but the American people while causing actual harm to military healthcare is beyond me. Dr. Kizer and his subcommittee get it and for that I thank them. Will DoD act? I hope so. However, Congress and the Administration must act if DoD does not act quickly.

I leave you with one additional quote from Dr. Kizer's letter:

"...After reading the Department's plan of action, the Committee is less confident that new construction should not be halted" . . ."

Now there is understatement.