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CHAIRMAN

August 27, 2009

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington DC 20420

Secretary Shinseki,

I am compelled to write you today as I have read of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) decision to cancel the work currently being done at the University of Texas (UT) Southwestern Medical Center regarding Gulf War Syndrome. As you well know, an estimated 175,000 to 210,000 veterans of the Persian Gulf War suffer multiple chronic symptoms that are considered to fall under the definition of Gulf War syndrome, according to the VA's own research.

As a practicing physician for over 25 years and an avid follower of the science surrounding Gulf War syndrome, I know Dr. Robert Haley, who was leading the research project at UT Southwestern, to be a foremost authority on the issue. I believe his work is so vast in its promise that it has advanced not only medicine's understanding of Gulf War syndrome, but also holds the promise to benefit research for ailments suffered by non-veterans alike, including chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia.

The fact that Dr. Haley has come so far in his research speaks to his longstanding dedication to helping those men and women returning from the Middle East following the conclusion of the War. His efforts date back to his series of papers published in 1997 in the Journal of the American Medical Association after his initial work on the issue started several years prior. In fact, Dr. Haley has tracked many of his test subjects since the early 1990's providing some of the most comprehensive long term study of veterans with Gulf War syndrome.

For example, research from Dr. Haley has shown that veterans suffering from Gulf War syndrome have lower levels of a blood enzyme called paraoxonase, which is linked to the human body's response to fighting the sarin toxin. Veterans who served in the same geographical area but did not have Gulf War syndrome symptoms had higher levels of paraoxonase. This one finding barely scratches the surface of Dr. Haley's work and the scientific advances he has made. I could easily go on about Dr. Haley's discoveries, but I will not list them here as they have been detailed in numerous medical and scientific journals.

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Given these facts I was pleased when in 2006, UT Southwestern and the VA established a dedicated, collaborative Gulf War illness research initiative. I am saddened that despite all of the substantial breakthroughs made by Dr. Haley and his team, the VA will not exercise the third year of its five-year contract with the University as announced yesterday.

I have read the VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) report from July 15, 2009, and am of the belief that many of the issues detailed in the report amount to communication issues between the University and the VA that could easily be resolved. It would appear that the VA agreed with this assessment as yesterday's announcement of the cancellation of the project came on the same day the VA met with UT Southwestern staff to resolve some of the issues detailed in the OIG report. It is my sincere hope that this meeting was not simply grandstanding, as the work being done at UT Southwestern is simply too critical to our nation's veterans.

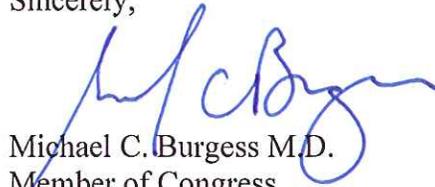
The OIG report did not note any type of fraud or nonfeasance on the part of Dr. Haley or his team. In the area of patient privacy it was clear that both UT Southwestern and the VA were attempting to act in the best interest of the patients. I have no doubt these issues could have been mediated and I have been told that UT Southwestern was committed to this end. Is it the assertion of the VA that UT Southwestern was not engaged with the VA in addressing the concerns raised by the VA OIG? Is the VA aware of any scientific nonfeasance on behalf of Dr. Haley or his team that would have violated the scope of the terms of the contract?

Secretary Shinseki, I know that you have a unique appreciation for ensuring that our veterans have access to the cutting edge science that will aide medical professionals in designing effective treatments and cures for their ailments. Quoting your Department's own Acting Undersecretary for Health Dr. Gerald Cross, "As part of our commitment to this vital effort, we must make certain that our resources are used to support effective and productive research." I could not agree more and believe that this is just the type of research that Dr. Haley has dedicated the last 15 years of his life to with proven scientific results. When we are this close to major medical breakthroughs on Gulf War syndrome, as I sincerely believe we are, because of Dr. Haley and his team, our course should not be diverted so severely. I believe in Dr. Haley's work as a doctor and believe that when we are so close to the finish line we should not pause in our efforts.

I ask that you please look at the work being done at UT Southwestern and ask you to reconsider cancelling the funding for Dr. Haley's breakthrough research. I in turn commit myself and the resources of my office to aiding the VA in any way possible to see that any issues regarding compliance with the contract terms are resolved to the satisfaction of the VA.

I thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this timely matter. If you have any questions, or need additional information, please contact me or my Legislative Director J.P. Paluskiewicz, at 202-225-7772.

Sincerely,



Michael C. Burgess M.D.
Member of Congress