

California's VA Health Care System – A Great Place to Work

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Because there is a popular misconception among many in the health care profession that VA's are full of grumpy old men, smoking cigarettes through their tracheostomy sites and complaining about their feet, physicians often dismiss a career in the veterans' hospitals without taking a real look at the unique opportunities that exist there. While some of us trained at VA's which were poorly run, understaffed and unappreciated, the current VA hospitals in California now deliver cutting-edge health care, including in the emergency departments (EDs).

Consider these system advantages within the VA. All the patients seen in the ED have easy access to primary care or specialty services. Because the California VA system is an integrated network, there are specialty services available for consultation, admission and follow up regardless of pathology. This greatly facilitates patient disposition, characteristic of large HMO's or university hospitals. Another advantage to working in a CA VA ED is University affiliation. In most of the CA VA ED's there are abundant opportunities to teach rotating residents and students and to interact with fellows and faculty with dual academic and VA appointments. Another often overlooked advantage to working at the VA is a diverse patient population (say what!?). Believe it or not, CA VA ED's now deliver care to a wide variety of patients. As opposed to the days of old, due to recent military "operations," an increase in the number of women in the military, the recent downturn in the economy, and an increase in VA eligibility, the CA VA ED's now treat a patient population much like any community ED. Moreover, several of the CA VA's are

level 2 trauma centers, and all see their fair share of injured patients. Of potential additional interest is the integration of the ED staff into disaster drills, pandemic preparation and HAZMAT activities. The new CA VA emergency physician frequently has a role in the VA system beyond the microcosm of the ED, including leadership roles in EMS and disaster preparedness, often on a local and statewide level.

Other advantages to working for the feds include: great benefits, a very reasonable schedule with lots of holidays off, educational leave, vacation time, sick leave and soon to come federal "new parents leave (a paid month)." While each site may have some slight variation, most VA emergency physicians work a semi regular "tour of duty" in the ED, frequently resulting in fewer nights, holidays and weekends. This semi regular schedule provides the ability to work around child care, school, or a partner's schedule. The likelihood of litigation and malpractice suits is virtually eliminated. If there is an allegation of malpractice from a patient or patient's family, it goes through a federal process of evaluation, and a settlement agreement is reached without mention of the individual provider. This translates into no lengthy law suits, and no report to the national data base. Although there are many advantages to working in the VA system, probably the most personally rewarding part about being a VA physician is patient gratitude. Hearing "thank you doctor" multiple times a day seems like a good way to prevent "burn out," is. In summary, the state of Emergency Medicine in the CA VA ED's may just be a glimpse of a successful public health care system.