The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) opened its fifth Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center (PRC) at the South Texas Veterans Health Care System (STVHCS) in San Antonio in October 2011. The state-of-the-art, $66 million inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation center treats veterans and active-duty service members with multiple traumatic injuries. San Antonio joins existing PRCs in Richmond, Va., Tampa, Fla., Palo Alto, Calif., and Minneapolis, Minn.

"Today, casualties survive catastrophic injuries that would have been lethal just a few years ago," says Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki, who gave the keynote address during the dedication event in San Antonio. "More of our wounded are surviving, and more of them are permanently disabled by devastating injuries. They had the will to survive. We owe them the rest of the journey home."

The gait lab features cameras and pressure sensors in the floors, as well as sensors that are placed on the patient, all of which are linked to a high-tech computer-analysis system.
The cutting-edge PRC works closely with DoD to treat service members and veterans with physical, cognitive, psychological or psychosocial impairments and functional disabilities. Examples of polytrauma care include traumatic brain injury (TBI), amputations, burns, fractures, hearing loss and visual impairment.

The VA and DoD have shared a longstanding integrated collaboration in the area of TBI through the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC). Since 1992, DVBIC staff members have been integrated with VA Lead TBI Centers (now Polytrauma Rehabilitation Centers) to collect and coordinate surveillance of long-term treatment outcomes for patients with TBI.

“We have been working pretty closely with DoD for a long time now but with the pace of the conflict over the last 10 years picking up, the rapid growth in veterans and military retiree populations here, and the changes in VA Care eligibility, the size of our mission has increased,” notes Dr. Jim Wells, PRC chief medical officer and chief of Physical Medicine and Rehab.

The new PRC also works in conjunction with Brooke Army Medical Center, The Center for the Intrepid, Wilford Hall USAF Medical Center, the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and the U.S. Army Institute of Surgical Research.

The PRC consists of 12 acute-care polytrauma rehabilitation inpatient beds; physical medicine and rehabilitation services; outpatient polytrauma rehabilitation services; and refurbished prosthetic, rehabilitation and office space.

The STVHCS is comprised of two inpatient campuses: the Audie L. Murphy campus in San Antonio and the Kerrville campus in Kerrville, Texas. The STVHCS serves one of the largest service areas in the nation; last year, STVHCS provided almost a million outpatient visits to area veterans.

CUTTING EDGE EQUIPMENT

The new PRC houses a state-of-the-art gait lab where active-duty service members and veterans can come to have their walking, running or rolling ability analyzed and corrected. The gait lab features pressure sensors in the floors and a $200,000 treadmill that are linked to a high-tech computer-analysis system.

“We have an Assistive Technology Lab that provides the latest in devices to assist the patient in functioning in their home and community,” notes Wells. “Within a few months we will have two state-of-the-art therapeutic pools.”

He points out that equipment for the PRC was purchased based on “strong evidence supporting its use in the rehabilitation of various health disorders,” including major trauma, amputations, poor balance, poor endurance, strokes, traumatic brain injuries and others.

“A good thing about the VA is that the budget for medically indicated devices for patients is close to unlimited,” he continues. “When you look at our inpatient and outpatient therapies, we have reviewed, ordered and purchased the newest equipment that we could find that has a basis in science to use. We can evaluate a patient for, and provide them with assistive equipment, anywhere from a specific hand brace to an eye-gaze environmental control unit, which is for people who are paralyzed with all four limbs but can use their eyes to operate their house and wheelchair from that computer.”

FAMILY FRIENDLY

The STVHCS has made every effort to provide a family-friendly environment, and is getting ready to open a Fisher House near the hospital for families to stay at in support of loved ones receiving care.

“Families are important to us,” states Marie Weldon, South Texas Veterans Health Care System director. “We kept them in mind during all project stages of the PRC by not only enhancing veteran care and expanding services, but also by providing a family-friendly environment.”

“Having family involvement is critical for an optimal recov-
Every process from the serious life events that our patients sustain before being admitted to our unit,” adds Wells. “We strongly encourage the family members to participate in therapy with their loved one at the appropriate time – when the loved one is far enough along to benefit from the family member being trained to help. That gets the family member more vested in the process as well.”

Ultimately, he says the goal of the new PRC is “to return the veteran or active-duty service member to their highest level of function in their home, in their community and with their loved ones.”

**RECREATION THERAPY**

As is the case throughout the VA system nationwide, there is a robust Recreation Therapy Service at STVHCS, which is “a vibrant part of our facilities here,” says Wells.

Recreation Therapy Service provides therapeutic recreation activities, leisure education and recreation participation in order to rehabilitate, restore and remediate cognitive, physical, behavioral and social deficits.

Recreation therapy activities encompass a variety of modalities which include but are not limited to: creative arts, games, sports, music, dance, hobbies, community re/integration, spectator events, special therapy programs, wheelchair athletics and social recreation.

“Recreation therapists provide treatment services and recreation activities to veterans with disabilities, illnesses or other disabling conditions,” says Larry Long, director, Veterans Health Administration Recreation Therapy Program. “They treat and maintain the physical, mental and emotional well-being of the patient using a variety of techniques, including arts and crafts, sports, games, dance, music and community integration activities.”

The role of a recreation therapist is to work in conjunction with interdisciplinary team members, veterans, families and friends to assist in a continuum of care from admission to discharge.

The benefits of recreation therapy for veterans include improving physical well being such as weight management and controlling diabetes and hypertension. The therapy can also improve social functioning and help veterans develop new leisure skills, and can enhance creative expression and break down barriers for cultural expression.

Therapeutic recreation uses treatment, education and recreation services to help people with illnesses, disabilities and other conditions to develop and use their leisure in ways that enhance their health, functional abilities, independence and quality of life.

“Recreation therapists assist in maintaining the health of veterans receiving care at VA facilities for a variety of conditions, including those who are geriatric, chemically dependent, spinal cord injured, visually impaired and others,” Long explains. “They also assist veterans with disabilities to integrate into the community by helping them use community resources and recreational activities.”

**DUE RECOGNITION**

The STVHCS received accolades from an independent agency, the Joint Commission, who completed an unannounced survey in 2011. The Joint Commission is an independent, not-for-profit organization that accredits and certifies more than 19,000 healthcare organizations and programs in the United States. Its accreditation and certification is recognized nationwide as a symbol of quality that reflects an organization’s commitment to meeting certain performance standards.

Of particular note, during the Patient Safety Leadership session, the surveyors used a scoring tool to evaluate STVHCS and found the organization to meet all the requirements for “World Class” designation per the tool.

STVHCS scored better than the national average for all healthcare organizations, which includes private sector as well as VA.

“I am impressed by the hard work, commitment, and attention to detail of the STVHCS staff,” notes Lawrence Biro, VISN 17 Network Director. “The results of the survey confirm that STVHCS staff provide World Class care that is second to none. Your Veteran Centered Care efforts are an example for all to follow. Thank you.”