



**Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration  
Washington DC 20420**

JUL 10 2001

Richard K. Harding, M.D., President  
American Psychiatric Association  
1400 K Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20005

In Reply Refer To:

Dear Dr. Harding:

First, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate you on assuming the Presidency of the American Psychiatric Association (APA). I am sure that the many challenges confronting psychiatry and the mental health field will benefit from your leadership.

I would also like to offer some clarity about an issue that has apparently caused some confusion among psychiatrists and psychologists alike within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

Last August, Daniel B. Borenstein, M.D., former President of the APA, sent a letter (enclosed) to Laurent S. Lehmann, M.D., VHA's Chief Consultant for Mental Health, regarding a report that VA psychologists at our Buffalo, New York VA Medical Center were being admitted to membership in the medical staff as "independent practitioners" as a prelude to their being allowed prescribing privileges. Dr. Lehmann contacted the APA Governmental Affairs staff to reassure them that Dr. Borenstein's concerns were unwarranted and the information he had received inaccurate. Unfortunately, since that time there has been ongoing controversy and a flurry of Congressional letters written to me about this issue. Many of these letters reference the APA regarding this issue and I would like to formally clarify VA policy with you and interested APA members.

Psychologists are recognized as independent providers by the medical staff at the Buffalo VA Medical Center. This authority permits psychologists to practice independently within the scope of their license and specific clinical privileges granted by the facility. Prescribing authority is not within the scope of a psychologist's license nor is it listed **as a** clinical privilege for psychologists in Buffalo. To clarify further, prescribing authority was neither involved nor was a part of the privileging process for psychologists in Buffalo at any time or in any way. The recognition of psychologists as independent providers is not a new development. In fact, psychologists have been recognized as independent providers in VHA for many years. Further, granting this level of practice to psychologists is consistent with state law, VA policy, and accreditation bodies including the Joint Commission for Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO).

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VA policy regarding all health care professionals is that a facility may extend clinical privileges up to but not exceeding the scope of practice authorized by the professional's state license. VA does not, in every case, authorize practice to the full extent permitted by state licenses. The most obvious example is for physicians, most of whose state licenses have no limitations of practice as "a physician, and surgeon."

In the case of psychologists, state licensing laws do allow them to practice independently. However, state licensing laws do not allow psychologists to prescribe medication and VA has no plans to deviate from the policy of not exceeding the scope of practice of state licensing laws. I can assure you and other APA members that the situation at Buffalo was handled appropriately and is consistent with current VA policy.

I want to thank you and the APA for your ongoing interest in providing the best possible health care for our Nation's veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas L. Garthwaite". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Thomas L. Garthwaite, M.D.  
Under Secretary for Health

Enclosure

cc: Peggy J. Cantrell, Ph.D.  
President, AVAPL