

VETERANS' ADVISORY BOARD ON DOSE RECONSTRUCTION

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of its audits and assessments of Nuclear Test Personnel Review (NTPR) Program radiation dose assessments (RDAs) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claim procedures, the Veterans' Advisory Board on Dose Reconstruction (VBDR) offered a number of recommendations at the April 2008 meeting held in San Diego, California. The Board believes that these recommendations, if implemented, would improve the VA compensation program for atomic veterans.

For the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):

Recommendation 1: Given the age of atomic veterans, the Board recommends that sufficient staff at the Jackson Regional Office, who are experienced with radiation claims, be dedicated to the processing of ionizing radiation claims to insure expedited processing.

Recommendation 2: Thirty four percent of claims sent to Jackson from other VA regional offices (VAROs) were returned to the referring VAROs because radiation exposure was not part of the claim. Thus, the Board recommends that the staff at the local VAROs and associated service organizations receive further guidance regarding the identification of radiation claims and that a standard protocol be developed for referring claims to the Jackson Regional Office.

Recommendation 3: That the VA central office provide to the Jackson office personnel ongoing focused training on current trends and issues regarding radiation claims.

Recommendation 4: That the VA develop standard operating procedures with respect to running and interpreting the results of the Interactive Radio-Epidemiological Program (IREP) and develop detailed documentation supporting the decisions for processing both non-radiogenic and radiogenic claims.

Recommendation 5: That VA proactively communicate with atomic veterans to increase awareness of their potential eligibility for benefits. The VA has the lead on this recommendation with support as needed from DTRA on establishing the most current mailing list for the atomic veterans' community. A draft suggested letter is attached.

Draft letter to veterans

Dear

Our records indicate you may be an “Atomic Veteran,” someone who may have participated in U. S. atmospheric nuclear tests, served with the American occupation forces of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or were Prisoners of War in Japan at the conclusion of World War II. A brochure with all the details, and a list of specific nuclear tests, is enclosed. Exposure to ionizing radiation from nuclear devices in connection with your service may have caused health problems. Depending on the nature of your illness, and where and when you served, you may be entitled to a range of VA benefits. The surviving spouse and/or children of a veteran may be eligible for these benefits as well. We want to tell you how to begin a claim if you think you may be eligible.

If records confirm that you served at specific locations at specific times, and independent medical evidence confirms that you have any of 21 health problems that might be caused by ionizing radiation, we automatically presume your illness was caused by the radiation exposure and you qualify for benefits. (The list of these presumptive diseases is included in the enclosed brochure.) Any benefits awarded will depend on your specific health circumstances. A claim may be filed for diseases that are not included in this presumptive list; in those cases, the Department of Defense estimates the radiation dose you likely received. With that added information we can then judge whether you qualify. You should know, however, that many Atomic Veterans who file such claims do not meet various criteria related to radiation exposure and are denied.

It is important for you to know that the secrecy oath taken by atomic veterans was rescinded by the Secretary of Defense in 1996; so you are now free to talk about your service in filing a claim.

If you think you may be eligible and want to take the next steps:

- you can call or visit your local VA center, or
- you can call the VA’s national toll free line at 1 800 827-1000, or
- you can visit the VA’s main website at www.va.gov, or
- you can visit the specific website we have about this program at www.va.gov/irad.

If you speak to anyone by phone, tell them you want information about filing a claim for illnesses that may be caused by radiation exposure.

Atomic Veterans served patriotically; if you are an Atomic Veteran, or the surviving spouse or child of an Atomic Veteran, we want you to get the benefits you deserve. We look forward to serving you.

Sincerely,