

Miami VA: Steps taken to prevent contamination

May 12 2009, By LISA ORKIN EMMANUEL , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The top Veterans Affairs official in Miami said Tuesday she has taken steps locally to prevent the kind of problems that exposed patients to contaminated medical equipment at VA hospitals in three states.

Mary D. Berrocal, director of the Miami VA Healthcare System, told The Associated Press she has hired someone in Miami to supervise training, make sure biomedical equipment works properly there and ensure the problems aren't repeated.

"We have truly scrutinized our systems to ensure that doesn't happen," she said. "We truly, truly are on it ... We've really, really, really expended every effort possible to make sure that this is an isolated situation."

But she declined to discuss specifics about the contamination problems or say how they went undetected for so long.

Five patients have tested positive for HIV - three of them in Miami - and 33 have tested positive for [hepatitis](#) since February, when the VA started notifying more than 11,000 people treated at three VA medical centers to get follow-up blood checks because they could have been exposed to infectious [body fluids](#). The equipment is used for colonoscopies and ear, nose and throat procedures.

The hospitals are in Miami, Murfreesboro, Tenn., and Augusta, Ga.

Berrocal, who has been praised by some Miami veterans in the aftermath of the scandal, said that when she first heard about the situation: "I was heartbroken, you know."

The problems with cleaning equipment - and possibly co-mingling infectious body fluids - went on for five years at the Miami and Murfreesboro hospitals and about a year in Augusta.

Berrocal said she couldn't discuss the specifics because of a continuing investigation by the VA and its inspector general.

U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Fla., was informed Monday that the VA inspector general's report will be issued within weeks or days to the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Meek's spokesman Adam Sharon said.

Meek called for congressional hearings when the scandal broke out. Sharon said those hearings are expected to take place shortly after the report is issued.

North Carolina Sen. Richard Burr, the top Republican on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, has also called for hearings on the subject.

The endoscopic equipment is made by Center Valley, Pa.-based Olympus American Inc., and the company has said its recommended cleaning procedures are clear. Berrocal said it's "very complicated equipment."

She said a series of experts have reviewed the processes and the systems and improved them.

She added, "I think our quest has to be about doing everything possible, everything that we can to minimize the potential for error and to take

care of our patients. We have to constantly be vigilant"

The VA has stressed that the positive tests are "not necessarily linked" to medical treatment at its hospitals, and infections don't always cause symptoms and can go undetected for years.

No matter where the patients contracted the illnesses, Berrocal said the VA will treat them.

"Miami has a very high percentage of those illnesses anyway. It is very hard to tell whether they contracted it from this or not," she said. "To me, it just doesn't matter how they got it. If we found it, we are going to treat it."

Berrocal said the discovery of the problems at the VA may have helped improve health care nationwide.

"It's really unfortunate that this happened, however, I believe that it has increased awareness across the country about this piece of equipment. It's not only used in VA," she said.

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