
Defense Report

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More Bureaucracy Won't Help Armed Forces Medical Programs

Once again Congress is toying with a scheme to merge the military service's medical departments into a single new agency under the direct control of the Defense Department. More than a dozen studies have concluded that such action would be detrimental to the larger military mission of being prepared to treat combat casualties in the event of war. Further, it has been concluded that the creation of another layer of bureaucracy would achieve only minimal savings, would not provide better health care to beneficiaries and would be extremely harmful to the morale of military health care providers.

The issue of a "defense health agency" has most recently been raised as Congress expressed concern over the ability of the Army, Navy, and Air Force to provide wartime medical support, over the largely disappearing problems of accessibility of peacetime care in military hospitals, and over the spiraling cost of the Civilian Health and Medical Program for the Uniformed Services—CHAMPUS. The creation of a central agency has been suggested. But the Office of the Secretary of Defense already has responsibility for the overall supervision of DoD health affairs and directly manages the CHAMPUS program.

The services are effectively addressing existing problems through other means. They are moving to cut costs and improve the services provided by CHAMPUS and are seeking alternative means for treatment of military health care beneficiaries where such care is not readily accessible.

The services have greatly improved the quality of health care for their troops and their families and have allocated substantial additional resources toward the betterment of their combat readiness.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretaries of the Military Departments are deeply concerned over the potential impact of "health agency" proposals on force readiness and on cost-effective medical care. Taking the authority and responsibility for the provision of medical care for our troops and their families away from the services is the wrong way to go. Congress must consider these views carefully before deciding to impinge on the services' ability to accomplish these vital missions.