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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

7 February 2011

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The time has come for change at VAMC John Cochran. While the facility may have taken proper action in canceling surgical procedures last week, the fact that this happened is unacceptable and is only the latest occurrence in a string of mishaps.

In June 2010 the Missouri congressional delegation was notified that the dental unit at John Cochran put thousands of veterans at risk by failing to follow proper procedures. Last week, I learned that all surgical procedures at John Cochran have been suspended because "irregularities" were discovered. If either of these two incidents were unique cases from an otherwise well-run hospital, I would be concerned.

Sadly, this is all too consistent with the experience my constituents have repeatedly reported to me over the past decade. And, despite years of being promised improvements, most recently in July of last year by Dr. Robert Petzel and then acting Director Rimaann Nelson, with few exceptions, none seem to materialize.

Mr. Secretary, I know of veterans in my district that now travel hours out of their way to seek treatment at other Veterans hospitals because they actually fear for their lives were they to return to John Cochran.

Until there is a serious, public reform of the St. Louis VAMC, including holding senior staff accountable, I cannot in good conscience at this time seek additional funding and support expanded programs at a VA medical center that does not perform its current mission. If John Cochran were a ship or a military unit, the commander would have already been relieved and a comprehensive Inspector General investigation would have been launched. Instead, you are telling the veterans of the greater St. Louis area that everything is under control, when they know full well that is not the case.

In accordance with our concerns, I will be contacting colleagues and staff on the appropriate committees this week to explore ways in which Congress can express its concerns more concretely.

Over the years I have heard from veterans that have extolled the virtues of the VA hospital they have used in other parts of the country. I am not, with this letter, indicting the entire VA medical system. I simply want the St. Louis VAMC to be a place whose virtues we are pleased to extol.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "W. Todd Akin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "W" and "A".

W. Todd Akin
Member of Congress