

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
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DR. HEATHER MACKINNON

Mr. Chair, Members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak today on behalf of our veterans.

I would like to start by telling you a little about myself. I am a former Medical Officer who has served in both the Regular and Reserve Forces. I have participated in numerous military operations both at home and overseas. I have a unique general practice in Halifax which is composed of former military and RCMP members and their spouses. I formed this practice as I have discovered there is a definite need for a medical transitional service for both Regular and Reserve force personnel who have left or who are leaving the Canadian Forces. I am also an active member of the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia, or RUSI, who I am representing here today.

For those of you who may not be familiar with RUSI, I would like to take a moment to explain to you who we are and what our organization does. The Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia serves as a discussion and education forum on Canadian Defence and Security issues. Our membership includes serving and retired officers and members of the Canadian Forces, RCMP, other security agencies, business, industry, community leaders and other interested individuals who carry out a number of activities that support the implementation of effective foreign, defence and security policies. In addition we encourage the development and maintenance of Canada's military and security forces and feel strongly about the requirement for a comprehensive benefits package that many of our veterans require in order to sustain a reasonable standard of living.

In order to gain better understanding of the benefits available under the New Veterans Charter, RUSI Nova Scotia established a committee, of which I am a member, to determine if deficiencies exist and if so offer our assistance to help resolve shortfalls within the Charter in a fair and equitable manner. To date the committee has met with senior members of the Legion, Veterans Affairs Canada, the Veterans Affairs Committee Ombudsman, Nova Scotia Capital Health, Provincial and Federal politicians, veterans and serving members of the military.

We have concluded that there are many positive aspects to the programs available through the New Veterans Charter, however, the current VAC plan to downsize and eventually close existing long term care medical facilities as the World War II and Korean War veterans decline in numbers raises cause for grave concern not only for the veterans and their families but we believe all citizens of this magnificent country.

Modern, that is post Korean War veterans, do not have access to the specialized long term health care facilities currently run by Veterans Affairs Canada. These facilities are all specialized facilities ranging from Camp Hill Veterans Hospital in Halifax, Ste Anne de

Bellevue, Quebec, Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto to the smaller nursing homes around the country that have a few beds under contract to VAC. Modern veterans in need of long term health care must compete with the general public for beds in nursing homes or hospitals. Waiting lists are long for placement in these facilities. The facility may be located a great distance from that veteran's home and family. The facility is most likely not equipped to offer the expertise to deal with special veterans needs such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder treatment, severe head and body trauma and amputee rehabilitation.

I have permission from the family to discuss one such veteran with you. This gentleman, Major ret'd Philip Paterson. Major Paterson is also a patient that I have been looking after for several years. I knew him when I was serving with the Canadian Forces. Our committee visited him at home this past November. He was diagnosed several years ago with PTSD and more recently dementia. Although still living at home at this time his deteriorating condition was such that it was placing an unacceptable level of stress and financial hardship on his family. Major Paterson attended the Royal Military College at the same time as our committee chair. Despite his dementia it was clear during the conversation that he recalled with fond memories many of the same people and events that transpired some forty plus years ago yet was totally at a loss to remember things his wife had said only minutes earlier. His condition had deteriorated to the point where he urgently needed to be placed in a permanent facility, however despite numerous attempts to have him admitted to Camp Hill Veterans Hospital in Halifax he was officially denied access by Veterans Affairs. He was admitted to a long term care facility in Bridgetown, Nova Scotia, some three hours drive from his family.

The need for specialized programs and to be with other veterans provides one of the few remaining opportunities to foster any form of quality of life for our veterans.

Please don't take these comments as blasting Veterans Affairs Canada. There is much to like about the New Veterans Charter. There is a much stronger focus on reintegrating the injured veteran into the work force and society in general. There are extensive training opportunities, some hiring priority in the Federal Civil Service and psychological services such as the Operational Stress Injury Centres located in several provinces.

Veterans Affairs does not supply medical treatment to veterans. This is done through the provincial health care systems. DND and VAC have collaborated to set up Joint Personnel Support Units at various bases to help Canadian Forces member who are being medically released to transition into civilian life. These centres do not supply medical transitional services for these patients. This type of service is yet to be established. As you know that is what I do as a private general practitioner. I would like to see medical transitional services set up across the country designed to deal with both Regular and Reserve Force members.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, our modern day veterans have served this nation under the most dangerous and miserable conditions imaginable. Their dedication and sacrifice has helped form one of the cornerstones of Canadian Foreign Policy and has

earned Canada a reputation of the utmost respect and envy around the world. The ability to provide the specialized medical care so many of our veterans currently or will require is not a gift but a debt they are owed by this country. The measure of an institution such as Veterans Affairs cannot be determined by fiscal management alone, but rather by compassion and quality of the service they provide. I am absolutely convinced that any short term budgetary gains realized through a reduction to essential veterans' services will be minor when compared to the long term cost to our veterans, their families and society at large.

Mr. Chair, members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, please help to ensure our veterans receive the treatment and respect they have earned. Do not allow the erosion of specialized treatment or the elimination of the long term care facilities they so desperately require. I would like to express my sincere thanks for you having taken the time to listen to me today. If you have any questions I will do my best to answer them at this time.