

## Miami VA hospital flooded with calls about HIV, hepatitis

BY FRED TASKER

Worried military men and women flooded Miami Veterans' Hospital telephone hot lines Tuesday after Monday's announcement that improperly cleaned colonoscopy equipment might have exposed them to hepatitis and HIV.

The hospital received 2,662 telephone calls, and 351 veterans visited VA clinics in Miami and Fort Lauderdale to ask about their status and to schedule testing, said Dr. John Vara, the Miami VA's chief of staff.

On Monday, the VA disclosed that water tubes and reservoirs used in colonoscopies and endoscopies were being rinsed between procedures, but not disinfected as required by manufacturer's specifications. About 3,260 South Florida veterans had medical procedures since May 2004 using the faulty procedure.

Vara said Tuesday there was a "very small but more than negligible chance" the veterans could have been exposed to viruses that cause Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV.

In a colonoscopy, he said, a flexible tube called an endoscope carries a light and camera into the intestines to look for possibly cancerous tumors or polyps.

The endoscope also has a channel that carries water to clear the vision for the camera.

In these cases, the pump and reservoir that are used to move the water were rinsed after being used but were not disinfected as required, Vara said.

That creates a slight chance that back-flow from the pump could carry tiny amounts of virus into the patient, he said.

Dr. Mark Larson, gastroenterologist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, N.Y., said the infection would be unlikely to spread unless a cut or tear inside the intestine allowed the virus to enter the bloodstream.

Even so, he noted, "it doesn't take a lot of virus to spread things like hepatitis and HIV."

Sam Feldman, 56, ex-Army paratrooper and president of Veterans for Peace, said he was angry when he first heard of the problem.

"But I understand that the risks are very low," he said. "And at least they're not hiding it."

Asked what went wrong at the Miami VA, Vara said: "I can't say for sure. There are manufacturers' recommendations about how things should be handled. Not infrequently in healthcare it may not be implemented in quite that way."

Patients with concerns may call the Miami VA's call center at 305-575-7256 or 877-575-7256.

Herald staff writer Nicholas Spangler contributed to this report.