

WASHINGTON – A plan authored by U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell to cut bureaucratic red tape for returning veterans seeking health care has taken an important step toward passage.

Mitchell's amendment to help returning service members transfer their Department of Defense-held medical records to their doctors at the Department of Veterans' Affairs has been included in the House-Senate conference report on National Defense Authorization Act, H.R. 1585. The House is expected to consider the conference report this week.

H.R. 1585 will authorize a pilot program between the Defense Department and the VA aimed at more effectively sharing medical records.

Mitchell, who serves as chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, held hearings on the issue and discovered that VA doctors continue to lack full access to their patients' medical information, including the medical treatment patients received and medical conditions they may have had before they were discharged from the military.

"This is an important victory for our veterans," Mitchell said. "For too long, men and women of the military have had great difficulty in transferring their medical records to their VA doctors. I'm proud that once we learned more about the problem we were able to offer a practical approach, which I believe will go a long toward in improving veterans' health care."

Mitchell was joined by fellow subcommittee members Reps. Zack Space of Ohio, Tim Walz of Minnesota and Ciro Rodriguez of Texas in offering the amendment earlier this year.

According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, one of the reasons the Defense Department and VA are not sharing medical information in their differing interpretations of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the law that protects the release of private medical information. [Source: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05722t.pdf> ]

In May 2005, the GAO reported,

"DOD and VA have been working on a data sharing agreement for over 2 years, but have not reached an agreement. DOD and VA differ in their understanding of HIPAA Privacy Rule provisions that govern the sharing of individually identifiable health data for servicemembers currently receiving that exchange. DOD's and VA's inability to resolve these differences has impeded coming to an agreement on exchanging seriously injured servicemembers' individually identifiable health data."