

## **Quality of VA and Private Sector Mental Health Care**

MIRECC researchers found quality of VA and private sector mental health care to be “roughly equivalent” in the first head-to-head comparison of quality indicators. Overall, private sector mental health inpatients lower lengths of stay, more days to the next inpatient readmission and lower readmission rates within 14, 30 and 180 days of discharge compared to VA mental health inpatients. These modest differences favoring the private sector were explained by differences in the patients treated by the two systems. In contrast with private sector patients, VA patients are more likely to be poor, disabled and homeless – factors related to greater length of stay and higher readmission rates. VA outperformed the private sector for some groups of patients including those with substance abuse while performing worse for patients with depression diagnoses. An important trend in VA figures was steady improvement in quality indicators over time. VA records were examined between 1993-1997, covering the time immediately before and after the VA re-organized in 1995 into 22 distinct networks and shifted focus from acute inpatient care toward ambulatory and primary care. Over that time period length of inpatient stay for VA mental health patients declined 21% and readmission rates declined by 10% while private sector readmission rates rose sharply from 1993-1995. The researchers, Douglas Leslie, Ph.D., and Robert Rosenheck, M.D., interpret their findings as indicating that the overall quality of mental health care in is comparable in VA and private sectors. Although the private sector outperformed the VA most quality measures, the differences were small, the VA improved markedly over time and VA patients are sicker and more socially disadvantaged.