

Trends in adopting the national environmental exposure assessment note template in the Veterans Affairs Health System

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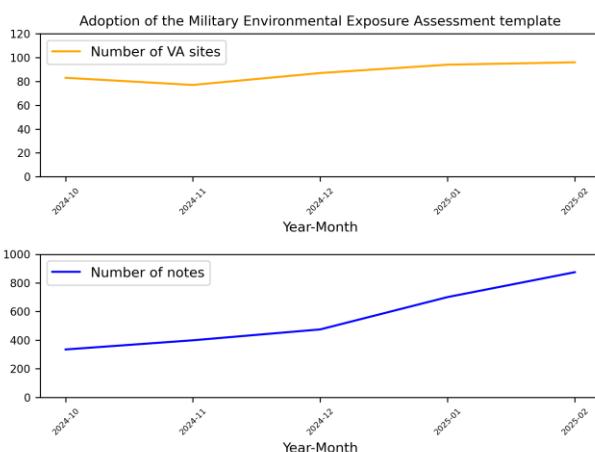
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Introduction

Environmental exposures to toxic chemicals and substances can negatively influence human health. Veterans who have been exposed to toxicants due to their prior military status require prompt assessment to determine whether medical conditions are associated with these exposures. Standardized electronic health record (EHR) note templates can facilitate the assessment and documentation of past exposures and enable improved identification of veterans who are at risk for potential long term health outcomes. For example, veterans who develop certain conditions presumed to be linked to Agent Orange and other toxic exposures may be eligible for disability compensation.¹ To enable the systematic assessment military environmental exposures, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) rolled out a new national note template, “Military Exposure Assessment”, for documenting environmental exposures in October 2024. The note template shows up as a structured list to clinicians and comprehensively assesses whether patients have had contacts or suspected exposures to air and water pollutants and chemicals (such as aromatic amines, asbestos, benzene, PFAS). We analyzed trends in adoption of the national note template across the Veterans Health Administration in 170 Medical Centers across the US and make recommendations on how to improve the documentation of environmental exposures in military healthcare settings. We also characterized the trends specifically among patients with a neoplasm diagnosis within VA, as multiple neoplasms are associated with environmental exposures and the standardized assessment and template may benefit neoplasm patients.

Methods We extracted clinical notes with titles containing “Military Exposure Assessment” and used the assessment template from the VA Corporate Data Warehouse (CDW) as of February 28th, 2025. Using the VA Central Cancer Registry, we identified patients with neoplasm diagnosis. We also extracted the patients’ demographics, VA stations and documentation creation time.



Results In total, 2,785 notes from 2,774 patients distributed across 115 VA sites were identified. Out of these patients, 188 have a neoplasm diagnosis (89 prostate, 29 bone marrow, 12 kidney) within the VA Health System. Overall, there is an upward trend of the template adoption since its official introduction in October 2024. The number of patients with a neoplasm diagnosis that has been assessed using the template also increased from 20 in October 2024 to 55 in February 2025. The number of participating VA sites is also promising – 68% (115 out of 170) VA sites had at least one note using the template. On average, the VA sites have 24 notes using the template (std = 33). 75% of the participating VA sites have less than 31 notes using the template.

Discussion and Future Work

We analyzed the trend in adopting the environmental exposure assessment note template within the VA since its introduction in October 2024. We observed a clear upward trend in the number of notes that leveraged this standardized template, and a wide range of VA sites adopting this template. The prevalence of using the template to assess environmental exposures within the participating VA sites can be improved, as most sites have a limited number of patients assessed. Future efforts should continue to broaden the range of VA sites and clinicians to adopt the template and identify concerns and reasons for the lack of adoption. Future work should also seek to understand barriers prohibiting wider and more sustained adoption of the template.

REFERENCES

1. The PACT Act and your VA benefits [Internet]. Veterans Affairs. 2024 [cited 2025 Jan 27]. Available from: <https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/>