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A WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

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Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical health care practice, and ethical practice is an essential component of health care quality. Consider an example: A patient undergoes a surgical procedure; from a technical perspective, the operation was perfectly executed, and from a service quality perspective, the patient seemed perfectly satisfied with the care he received. So the care was of high quality, right? Not necessarily. Imagine that the patient was never really informed—or was even misinformed—about the procedure he received. Why would this be a problem? Because in our society, it is a fundamental right of every patient to accept or refuse any recommended treatment. High quality, patient-centered care means care that recognizes that all patients should be treated in a way that respects their individual needs, and their individual values.

This essential element of quality health care is reflected in national VHA policy on informed consent, which aims to provide practical guidance to help make the ideal of patient-centered care a reality throughout the VHA system.