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VA’s Atomic Medicine Program and Dr. Rosalyn Yalow of the Bronx VA

Bronx, NY - Barely one year after atomic bombs were dropped in World War II, Congress enacted the Atomic Energy Act on August 1, 1946. An important component of the law authorized the use of atomic radioisotopes for peaceful purposes such as biological and environmental research to benefit society. By the end of 1947, the Veterans Administration was among the first Federal institutions to initiate an Atomic Medicine program.

Dr. George Lyon, who was involved with the World War II Manhattan Project (atomic bomb) and testing at Bikini Island in the Pacific, became VA’s first Special Assistant to the Chief Medical Director for Atomic Medicine and director of the isotope program in 1947. The initial purpose of the Atomic Medicine program was to prepare VA to handle
veterans’ disability claims resulting from the military’s atomic bomb testing, but it later evolved into full research and clinical programs. In 1947, the Atomic Energy Commission had licensed 25 institutions to receive isotopes and six (6) VA hospitals were authorized for radioisotope laboratories at: Framingham, MA; Bronx, NY; Cleveland, OH; Chicago, IL; Minneapolis, MN; and Los Angeles, CA. Dr. Rosalyn Yalow, of the Bronx VA, who later received a Nobel Prize for her research, was among the elite scientists and nuclear physicists who flocked to VA to work for this cutting-edge program.

By 1949, VA had established 12 radioisotope labs (out of 129 hospitals) and that number grew to 86 by 1965 (out of 168 hospitals). VA was a seedbed for medical innovation during this exciting golden age of atomic medicine which, today, has benefited the world at large more than ever imagined. Radiation pharmacology to cure cancer and other diseases, CT scanners, nuclear pacemakers, the Human Genome Project, DNA/genetic testing and much more, were borne from research conducted by VA doctors, scientists, and inventors, often in collaboration with medical schools or other partners such as the National Cancer Institute. Around 1971 the field was formalized and has since been known as Nuclear Medicine. Today, more than 20 million nuclear medicine procedures are conducted worldwide every year.

To learn more, check these links:
http://www.nuclearmuseum.org/see/online-museum/history/nuclear-medicine/
http://www.doomedicalsciences.org/

For more information related to this story or the James J. Peters VA Medical Center, please contact Jim Connell, Public Affairs Officer, at 718.584.9000, Ext. 6620.

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