

June 17, 2015

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is in regard to the treatment and care of my father, Sam R. Corace Jr., who has been a patient at the VA Hospital La Jolla since the morning of April 17, 2015 at one am. He was discharged yesterday, June 17, 2015 for the second time since his original admittance in April. His discharge yesterday was handled in a most unbecoming manner by the VA, and in fact put him in grave physical danger.

So that you may know the background, I will try to explain as briefly as possible. My brother and I received a call from the VA Hospital in Pittsburg, PA back in the summer of 2014, informing us that our father needed a surgery. For one, we had not known of his whereabouts since 2008. This phone call being the first we had heard from him in years, we needed time to get all the information. The VA in Pittsburg was asking us to give consent to amputate his foot, possibly his leg, and we felt making a decision like that required fact finding to say the least. Before we could get more information or organize a trip, he disappeared again. It was awful. He was discharged from the VA in Pittsburg. I have no further information regarding his discharge or severity of his condition other than it was such that they located us asking for consent.

The next time we get a phone call it is the end of February. Sam Corace was in Queen's hospital in Honolulu, Hawaii. He had been living on the beach in Waikiki where he was robbed of his debit card and all identification. He had also fallen or been assaulted, we are not sure, but he had cuts all over particularly on his legs, which got severely infected, so much so that he had to have emergency surgery to remove the boils and some of the outer infection. He had contracted MRSA in the five open wounds and he was over all in very poor health. They asked the same of us, that we give consent to this surgery, an amputation possibly to his knee.

This time I was able to travel to Honolulu and be there in person. I wanted to ensure that he was being cared for and not discharged in the state he was in. I arrived in Honolulu on February 20, 2015. I spent a week there getting reacquainted with my father and meeting the medical team. They wanted to do an amputation, but I was swayed by one doctor that believed it was not actually necessary to amputate, that if he were put on a vigorous course of antibiotics it may get better. It was my opinion that it were at all possible to save his foot we should exhaust every avenue. He was also still very bad off with the outer skin infection.

After approximately ten weeks of antibiotics they were ready to discharge him. He refused surgery and kept insisting on receiving the IV antibiotics longer. At his point we,

my brother and I, just wanted to get him to California where we both live. While this was all happening, we had been investigating every avenue looking for help. We had asked the VA why they weren't treating him there at the Tripler Army Medical Center and they insisted that he was fine at Queen's so the VA, was not obligated to offer treatment. We called every number we could find asking for help. No one would listen. I wrote an email and sent it into the VA on their website. That email got me in touch with Simon Marquez from the CA Dept. of Veterans Affairs. From there I had hoped he would be able to help us arrange a transfer to the VA hospital in La Jolla so that we could get another opinion on our father's leg condition and we (my brother and I) could be geographically closer to him to offer support.

The VA does not offer transfers to people like my father. I'm not sure who is eligible, but he was not. Queen's hospital wanted his bed empty. We were told of his discharge date a few days before and my brother arranged to fly to Honolulu this time. Queen's Medical Center discharged my father to my brother's care on April 16<sup>th</sup> and they flew to San Diego, CA. There were no arrangements with the VA La Jolla except they had made him an appointment with a primary care doctor at some point in the future. When he walked out of the hospital in Hawaii he had open wounds that were still severely infected with MRSA, and I had told the hospital that it was not safe to put him on a plane. He was discharged.

On the flight to Honolulu, my brother did his best to care for and accommodate our father. Along with having the bone and skin infection, he also is mentally ill. He is very functioning compared to some; by it is still difficult to handle to the untrained. Queen's also informed us that he had COPD, diabetes, Hepatitis C & B on top of everything else. We needed help and sought out the VA in Hawaii before taking him on a plane, but they refused to even return my phone calls.

During the flight to San Diego, my father had to be medically assisted by the flight attendants. He needed oxygen and insulin. He has a difficult time keeping track of his diabetes regimen on his own. He is aware of his need for insulin, but unable to keep track of time in the way necessary to manage that particular disease. Thankfully, the flight crew handled it well and he landed safely.

After that incident on the flight, we felt our only option was to just walk him into the emergency room at the VA La Jolla. We had tried to arrange a transfer, but they refused. Since he had just had a medical emergency on the plane we felt it was the only thing to do.

My father was brought into the emergency room early morning on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April. My brother was there until four in the morning, until he had to get home and tend to his family. I got a called around seven from an angry doctor, demanding to know why our father was there. Shocked by his manner and in another state at the time of the call, I tried to quickly explain. He did calm down, why he was so upset in the first place was beyond me, but I wanted to do what I could to help shed light on things. I told him what happened on the plane and everything leading up to that trip. My father was admitted and the VA La Jolla began treating him.

One week after my father was admitted to the hospital I received a phone call from Dr. Prekash (who I believe is still in medical school) demanding I pick up my father or he would be discharged. I said to her that I was in Charlotte, NC for work and that would not be possible. She then informed me she would have him “discharged to a homeless shelter” if I did not pick him up. I’m sure you can imagine how upsetting this was for my brother and I. I later learned she was completely out of line and in his current medical condition to discharge him was risky. I managed to find a skilled nursing facility, Life Care Center in Vista, and they helped arrange for him to go there. The social worker at the VA did not offer to help and only insisted it was the family’s responsibility to find him placement. He was discharged and my brother brought him to the Life Care Center.

My father kept complaining that he hadn’t seen a doctor after being in the new facility a few days. I wasn’t sure why they had not had their primary care physician see him, but he was complaining about his foot hurting, where the source of his bone infection is located. I told him to be patient not knowing what else to do. I began to inquire why he hadn’t seen a doctor and what his care plan was. The Life Care Center was feeling the same way. They were not given enough information from VA La Jolla to know how to properly care for him.

I took my father to a routine primary care physician appointment at the VA approximately one week after his discharge. The appointment one the one that was arranged prior to him being admitted that I had mentioned much earlier in this letter. I was upset that he wasn’t getting cared for and the VA didn’t seem to want to help him. His doctor, Dr. Baxi was very attentive, but I wasn’t sure she had the whole picture. I know doctors seen hundreds of patients and they don’t have time to research each one. After listening to her asking my father questions for a few minutes, I was even more concerned. It seemed that she was unaware of his many conditions.

I went to the check in counter and asked who was in charge of the primary care physicians. A man handling the desk told me a name and I then asked how was I supposed to get ahold of him. A few moments later, I was allowed to come into an office and met Kathryn Schreiber. She introduced me to Tom, Dr. Baxi’s nurse and promised me that she would see to it that my father was taken care of by Dr. Baxi, Tom, and herself.

While I had been talking to Kathryn my father was still speaking to Dr. Baxi. As I walked back into the exam room, they were taking the dressing off my father’s wounded foot to examine it. It did not look good at all. She told Tom to have my dad taken down to ER and admitted. It was clearly still very infected and it seemed the pill antibiotics were not helping. It had gotten worse again since his discharge.

After several hours in the emergency room he was again admitted to the hospital. He was put on IV antibiotics and we began again. I only hoped that this time we would make some progress in his care and make an aftercare plan.

We met with the care team and discussed what they believed needed to happen. Of the many doctors in the room, Dr. Costa was the only one that really made an impression. She was the podiatrist and the surgeon that would do the operation. She expressed her opinion and her estimation of the surgery was much less extensive than all of the previous doctors. I had a glimmer of hope. My father asked to see his MRI. I am

not clear why, but they didn't show it to him. They did show him his x-rays, but were unable to show him the x-rays taken previously at either Queen's Hospital in Hawaii or the VA Hospital in Pittsburg, PA. I mention this because I wanted him to see everything and if there was progression of his infection than he would be able to see it for himself.

Of course, he is mentally ill and unable to really differentiate some things from being true or false. Even so, he should be given all of the information possible in hopes that he will agree. When you seem to be withholding information to someone who is paranoid, it only worsens the matter.

The treatment team was growing impatient with him and insisted the surgery was indeed life threatening. He kept requesting IV antibiotics believing it may cure his infection. My brother and I (and our loved ones) only wanted to see him cared for and was trying to help in any way possible.

The following week I was out of town when he called me and said that the hospital had placed him on a hold and admitted him to the psychiatric ward. I did not believe it would be beneficial to him, and it was made clear several times that his infection was something we had to address, but not urgent in nature. The hospital decided that he was a danger to himself because he would not agree to the surgery they wanted to do, an amputation to his foot to remove the infected bone.

As I mentioned before he did not want to agree to the surgery and I had a hard time with the idea of forcing him. Not only did I have a hard time, but Queen's medical center decided it wasn't ethical to force him into surgery. The psychiatric team at VA La Jolla had decided that they would get a court order to force him into the surgery. A surgery we were told is not imperative that he have done right away.

He was held for ten days. He tried to win a hearing to get out, but it was refused. On Monday 1 June 2015, he was on his way to a Writ Hearing to attempt to be moved from the second floor psychiatric unit to the third floor medical unit. I was not made aware of this court hearing and happened to be arriving because I was told he was having the surgery done at nine am. I saved the voicemail on my phone asking me to come down to be there to consent for the surgery. I arrived just in time to see him being wheeled strapped down to a bed down the hallway. A nurse was kind enough to give me some information. I drove down and met my father and the paramedics at the San Diego County courthouse. The judge ruled in his favor and he was to be released from the psychiatric unit upon return to the hospital. It was our intention that he be immediately readmitted to the medical floor and have the surgery as soon as possible. I believe the experience with the judge helped persuade him. Instead they had him brought to the front door in a wheel chair with a bag of pills and I was supposed to know what to do next.

In his time in the psych unit he was given antipsychotic medicine in pill form every day. He was being forced to take it and there were no real signs of improvement. My family does want to do anything we can to help him improve. We felt the drugs they were giving him were not effective enough and requested a new drug. We asked he be given the long lasting Invega shot in hopes that if we got him started on it there he would continue upon release. After some disagreement, they did order it for him, but kept saying that they couldn't administer it until he was an outpatient. It is my understanding it is

quite expensive and for whatever reason they refused to administer it to him while he was on the hold. He left the psych unit having never been given the shot.

For ten days, they held my father in the psychiatric unit and did not do the surgery for him or give him the medicine that could have potentially really helped him. When I asked Dr. Lehman in a recent meeting why, he said, "it's just easier to deal with them when they are locked up." I understand how difficult people like my father are, but I disagree with locking them up. He isn't a danger to anyone and yes, he needed surgery, but it wasn't urgent in nature.

After his release, he wanted to be placed back on the medical side of the hospital and he did actually agree to do this surgery at this point. The hospital said no, they can't take him, and discharged him to the street. I was outraged. They locked him up to force him into a surgery, and when he finally agrees that say they can't take him now. What is going on here? I was at a complete loss as to what to do. He wants to have the surgery and now they do not want to do it?

I also need to say that while he was locked up he missed an appointment for his assessment into Chula Vista Veteran's Home. The CA run VA home in Chula Vista is really the best place for him and after missing an appointment, it does not look good for him now. The hospital was very unconcerned.

We got him into a motel for the night. He just needed to rest at this point. He was walking with a cane and it caused him a great deal of pain. I did what I could to make him comfortable.

He had an appointment with Vascular Surgery a few days later. I drove him myself. We got some of his prescriptions filled and he even saw his primary care doctor. I was livid as to why they were not arranging for this surgery after all they put us through saying he needed it. I walked into the Patient Advocate office and met Roxanne Rivers. In the course of the conversation, I was told that I should take him to a different hospital for the surgery. She handed me a pamphlet explaining how I can get the VA to pay for it. I was outraged. I had also asked her why she had not gotten back to my brother or myself, as we had both made complaints the week before.

The result of the conversation with Roxanne Rivers was that Dr. Kruse, the podiatrist, did not want to perform the surgery anymore. She felt he had been coerced into it and it was unethical. I respected her professional stance, but something had to be done. Another surgeon came down to Ms. Rivers' office to meet me, Dr. Malone. All the while this is going on my father is in another part of the hospital waiting for this appointment with vascular. The doctor I met with in Ms. Rivers office was dismissive to say the least. He said he would look over the case and let me know if he would do the surgery. It was just devastating. How is it that after everything they did to try to force him they would not do the surgery now? A surgery that was so urgent they locked my father in the psychiatric ward for refusing?

I left Ms. Rivers' office without any hope really. I went to get a coffee and meet my father in his appointment.

I walked in and we waited. I honestly had no idea the purpose of this appointment, but my father is very diligent about wanting to keep all of his doctor

appointments. So we waited. We met with Dr. Owens. He explained to my father why they needed to do the surgery. He spoke to my father directly and respectfully. It was probably the first person in the hospital aside from the nurses, to do so since he was brought there. Dr. Owens was familiar with all that had happened since he was the chief of surgery. He knew that while in the psych ward my father was scheduled for surgery, but Dr. Kruse was unable to do the surgery because he refused it and all the confusion about consent. Dr. Owens was able to get through to my father somehow, and if you met him you would see how he is really a phenomenal physician. For the very first time at this hospital, we had hope. So he asked my father directly if he would agree to this surgery and my father told him yes. I would still have to give consent because they had declared him incompetent, but he was doing the surgery willingly. Dr. Owens said he would work with Dr. Kruse and get things scheduled as soon as possible.

The next week he was admitted and the surgery was done the next day. It went well and now we could finally get started on the road to recovery. There was still much ahead, but with this tackled I thought my father had a chance at a new life.

It's never that simple with the VA. Yet again they were ready to discharge him. I went to the hospital every day to check on him and make sure he had everything he needed. One day Tricia Pouche, the homeless veteran social worker, caught me in the hallway while I was looking for him. Instead of asking me for some time to talk and let me continue to look for my father and check up on him she began to berate me in the hallway in front of the nursing station. She demanded to know my "discharge plan" and informed me, "if you do not have a place for him I will discharge him to the street. We do it to hundreds of people every day." I was thoroughly outraged. Not just by her threat, but by her words. I asked her, "is that why there are so many veterans on the corner of the VA hospital here in La Jolla begging for help on the street?"

We continue to argue in the hallway about how it was not her responsibility to help me. As I explained about my father has several issues and it's not as simple as just bringing him home or I truly would. He needs some level of care and supervision. A nursing home is not appropriate, but somewhere with supervised independent living would be. She insisted I give her a name. I did not know what to do and was at a loss. I thought she would help me, but she kept insisting it was not her responsibility. If it is not her responsibility to help a homeless veteran in need of assistance get transitional housing than what is her job exactly? It seems to be that she wants nothing to do with helping the homeless.

I finally escaped her rude and disrespectful verbal barrage and went to locate my father. He was smoking on the second floor in the smoking area. Another thing he was constantly belittled for doing despite it being one of the very few things that give him any pleasure in his life. Dr. Owens, being experienced with veterans like him did not berate him for it, only advised him it would be beneficial to stop, but knowing that guys like him have nothing left.

I discussed with my father what Ms. Pouche has said. He did not want to go to a skilled nursing facility. He just needed a chance to start on a new path and a helping hand

up. I was exhausting every avenue. In the meantime, the doctors had made no mention of discharge and he was just fresh from surgery still on IV antibiotics.

On the afternoon of June 16, 2015, I landed at San Diego Intl. Airport from Boston where I had attended a memorial service. While flying home to San Diego I had learned of my father's discharge and had demanded of Tricia Pouche why she had not tried to find him an adequate care facility. She continued to insist that it was not her job, he was competent to make his own decision, and allowed him to go onto the street. A man who cannot walk because he had a bone removed from his foot as well as a toe. He was given a wheelchair and once again put on the front sidewalk.

Tricia advised me he intended to fly to Honolulu. She said he was on an Alaska flight at eleven thirty am. I was upset beyond words. He did not want to go to a nursing home and because she would not lift a finger to help him find an alternative, he wanted to flee to where he felt at home. The problem was he had no home there, and in the condition he was in, he would only be in danger. He barely made the flight to California with the assistance of my brother. I do not feel he is fit to fly.

By a bit of grace his flight was delayed by the airline and when I landed from Boston he was still at the airport. I found him, smoking outside of course, and asked him to please come with me. He refused. I cannot imagine how he felt, battling mental illness, and repeatedly pushed out onto the street by the organization that was supposed to help him. He didn't look like he was holding up too well and I knew I couldn't let him fly.

After a bit of a scuffle he agreed to come with me. I called the airline and after explaining exactly what happened they were happy to pull his luggage and refund the ticket. I took him to a motel and got him a handicapped room, and he almost immediately went to sleep. The stress of the day and being in the condition he was in, he was exhausted. I worried the whole night if he was going to be okay.

Currently, he is at the Motel 6 in Carlsbad, CA where he chooses to be. He does not have much money left and is on a fixed income. My brother and I do not have the resource to pay for a board and care, as was suggested by Tricia Pouche. We do not have the resources to have him live with us. I do not feel I am being unreasonable by asking for help in finding him a suitable living situation. He does need some supervision, but does not need to be locked up. He missed his evaluation by the Chula Vista Veteran's Home because he was locked up at the hospital. I don't know that they will take him now. I have called every number given to me and the result is nil. I even called 211 twice with nothing resulting. He is still in the motel.

I now understand what all of the complaints about the VA stem from and have a new found respect for all of the veterans caught in this system set up for them, but that does not want to continue to manage their care. As a veteran myself I am horrified that we get treated as an inconvenience. Many veterans do not come out of the military unscathed, and it is the obligation of the Veteran's Administration to care for them. No excuses.

Tricia Poche, Homeless Veteran's Social Worker, and Dr. Lehman, Head of Psychiatry, sat in meeting with Simon Marquez and I on the afternoon of the 19 June where they both justified, and made excuse for their actions. Nothing was done to help

my father. No plan was made to assist him. Ms. Poche once again insisted it was not her job to help me and handed me a packet of brochures for nursing homes. My father is sixty-seven. He is mental ill, but that does not make him and invalid.

Please, someone help us. I just want him to have a safe place to live where he can enjoy what little life he has left. Locking him up is not the answer. It is the easy way out of dealing with people like him. He has been given a second chance to have a better quality of life. What do I have to do to get help in aiding him?

The good thing that did happen is that my father did get the surgery and in that respect is being taken very good care of by Dr. Ownes and Dr. Kruse. They have been fantastic in how they have handled treating my father and I am very grateful. Dr. Kruse continues to personally change his bandages and is obviously very concerned about his living situation.

I will not give up hope despite being incredibly discouraged. Finding him at the airport was incredibly disturbing. He is not the only veteran in this type of situation. If there is not a program that would suit his needs than one should be implemented. Literally, billions of taxpayer dollars have been dumped into the VA and if some of that is not going to help people like my father, I demand to know where it is going.

If Tricia Poche does not want to be bothered by helping my homeless veteran father, than she should be relieved of her position as the Homeless Veteran Social Worker. I make no apology for my father, he has many problems, but that does not mean that he shouldn't be given every avenue available for help. I am deeply disappointed by the manner in which he has been treated, not only as a daughter, but as a current service member.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to any suggestions.

Very Respectfully,

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