



# Trust in U.S. Military Health Care

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An Ipsos Public Affairs **White Paper**  
Study Author: Seth Messinger  
Published: September 2019

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**Trust** is a key component in interpersonal relationships between providers and patients and for solidifying reputation for institutions and companies alike. This is especially the case given the available options to patients and consumers. Healthcare as an industry, and as a set of providers, is particularly vulnerable to deficits of trust which can depress reimbursement rates and negatively impact revenue. While within the active-duty military community the default healthcare program is TRICARE Prime, there are other options that make seeking care in the civilian healthcare environment possible, for example TRICARE Select. For this reason, **trust** and **reputation** are important indicators of institutional health at both the provider and facility level. The broader healthcare industry is moving to put trust in the center of their relationships with patients. The military healthcare system can be included in that process. To explore the issue of trust within an existing military health framework the Joint Outpatient Experience Survey (JOES) survey contains questions that can be brought together to develop a composite score that would provide an indication about respondents' level of trust in their providers, and to a degree, their facilities.

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature in order to explore the application of trust in the healthcare industry, specifically in the Defense Health Agency (U.S.). In this paper we will define trust in the healthcare context, discuss ways that institutions can enhance trust among their users, ways that the broader healthcare community seeks to address trust and finally the way that the Department of Veterans Affairs uses trust in their communications and engagement with their patients. We conclude with a suggested approach that the data from JOES and JOES-C can be used to provide a trust indicator.

## Trust

In healthcare, as in other settings, trust is grounded in “*having confidence and security in eliciting a response from another person (or institution),*”<sup>1</sup> and “*an expectation that the other person[s] will behave in a way that is beneficial, or at least not harmful, and allows for risks to be taken based on this expectation.*”<sup>2</sup> If trust is a complex issue among individuals then the challenges scale up for institutions and companies. Trust can be divided into three different levels requiring correspondingly higher demands of belief and reciprocity.<sup>3</sup> These three are “Basic,” “Active” and “Interactive” trust with **interactive** involving the highest stakes for those involved. According to Colin Strong, Ipsos’s Global Head of Behavioral Science, interactive trust involves at least one party to a relationship to make their needs explicitly known making the party that shares their needs vulnerable. Therefore, this last, and, highest level of trust, can often be found in the relationships between patients and healthcare providers. Vulnerability is shared in this situation though because these high stakes relationships also pose high risks of disappointment and disenchantment.

U.S. Military health centers begin their relationships with Service-members and beneficiaries with certain institutional advantages. Military service confers a highly regarded status on both Service-members and beneficiaries alike. Furthermore, military service, as a “total institution,” provides a key set of frameworks for identity formation.<sup>4</sup> While grumbling can be a feature of day-to-day military life there is also an acknowledgment that those serving Service-members (uniformed or not) have made a highly significant commitment and are accorded the understanding that providers hold their patients’ best interests at heart.<sup>5</sup> However, when disappointment occurs the costs to the reputation of military health can be high.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rempel JK, Holmes JG and Zanna MP. 1985. Trust in close relationships. *Journal of Personal Social Psychology*. 49(1): 95–112.

<sup>2</sup> Thom DH, Wong ST, Guzman D, et al. 2011. Physician Trust in the Patient: Development and Validation of a New Measure. *Annals of Family Medicine*. 9(2): 148–154.

<sup>3</sup> Strong, Colin. *The Science of Trust*. Ipsos

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, Beth. 2009. *America’s Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press

<sup>5</sup> Messinger, S. Bozorghdad, S. and Pasquina, P. 2018 Social Relationships in rehabilitation and their Impact on Positive Outcomes among Amputees with Lower Limb Loss at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. *Journal of Rehabilitation Medicine* 50(1): 86-93

<sup>6</sup> Messinger, S. 2009. Incorporating the Prosthetic: Traumatic Limb-Loss, Rehabilitation and Refigured Military Bodies” *Disability and Rehabilitation*. 31(25): 2130-2134



## Stabilizing and Building Reputation

Broadly speaking American trust in institutions has suffered in recent years.<sup>7</sup> However, trust in specific corporations has remained relatively stable, or even increased. In addition, according to Gallup, Americans have given the military the highest confidence rating of any institution in American society for nearly two decades.<sup>8</sup> While drawing too close a comparison between military healthcare and corporations is an exaggeration, there are parallels especially given the choice options available through TRICARE. Thus, the lessons of **corporate reputation** research can potentially be applied to some perceived gaps in quality and trust seen in military healthcare provision. Corporate reputation researchers place the value of trust square in the center of their work. “Trust matters. When you trust someone, you give them the benefit of the doubt.”<sup>9</sup> Using systematic analyses Ipsos has found that a linear relationship exists between reputation and trust. Furthermore, in an international survey of companies Ipsos has found that those corporations which were seen as acting not only in the interest of their consumers, but of their consumers’ communities had higher levels of trust and more positive reputations than those that were seen in pursuit of more narrow economic interests.<sup>10</sup> While there is no direct causal link between reputation and consumer behavior nonetheless Ipsos researchers have shown that there is a “virtuous cycle” between reputation, communication and trust which enhances both consumer (patient) satisfaction and positive views of the “brand.”<sup>11</sup>

## Patient Centricity

Ipsos has connected the question of trust and corporate reputation to **patient experience** by identifying different approaches that healthcare institutions can take with their patients. The key approach is following the path to **“Patient Centricity.”** Most healthcare institutions would likely claim that patient centricity is the model they are already using. But a gap has emerged in patient perceptions. This is especially around questions of their own involvement in care decisions. Ipsos’s research on patient centricity offer strategies that can be adopted to reinforce positive perceptions about healthcare providers’ commitment to current and future patients. One of the key advantages that adopting a patient centric strategy offers is increased credibility and trust. This drives increased service utilization through choice that expands demands for services as well as opportunities to grow in order to serve that demand. Patients demonstrating a market preference for military healthcare facilities pulls TRICARE resources away from private sector healthcare.

One of the strategies to increase engagement with patients that the pharmaceutical industry is experimenting with is bringing patients into the process of medicine development and delivery. Healthcare institutions have several opportunities to bring patients more formally into the central conversation. Patients routinely participate in Institutional Review Board discussion (governing ethics in research), but they can also serve as a check on the routine functioning of clinical services. Innovation is already underway within the Military Healthcare System. For instance, William Beaumont Army Medical Center has instituted a **“mystery shopper”** program to further augment its efforts on improving trust and patient experience.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Young, Clifford. 2018. “Our Age of Uncertainty: A Road Map for Understanding the Political New Normal.” Ipsos

<sup>8</sup> Newport, F. 2017. U.S. Confidence in Military Reflects Perceived Competence. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/214511/high-confidence-military-reflects-perceived-competency.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> Global Reputation Center. “Unlocking the Value of Reputation.” Ipsos

<sup>10</sup> Ross, Trent. 2017. Reputation, Resiliency and Results: Using Trust to Unlock the Value of Reputation. Ipsos Public Affairs.

<sup>11</sup> Young, Clifford, Ross, Trent, and Gross, Michael. “In Search of the Holy Grail: Establishing the Link Between Corporate Reputation and the Bottom-Line, Point of View” Ipsos Public Affairs

<sup>12</sup> Phillips, Gareth and Elliott, John. 2018. “The Path to Patient Centricity: Closing the ‘How’ Gap.” Ipsos

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.army.mil/article/208831/wbamc\\_mystery\\_shopper\\_aims\\_to\\_gauge\\_patient\\_experience](https://www.army.mil/article/208831/wbamc_mystery_shopper_aims_to_gauge_patient_experience) (accessed July 5, 2019)

## Trust in the U.S. Government Health Space

Within the government health space, the Veterans Health Administration has centralized trust in its practice. The VHA discusses the issue of trust amongst its patients in two different ways. The first is through an ambitious **health messaging** program that engages patients' trust through the VHA's commitment to ongoing improvement and engagement. The VHA relies on outside evaluations published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *Journal of the American Psychiatric Association* to show that, in general, across services the VA outperforms the private sector. Beyond this, to demonstrate its commitment to its patients, the VHA has developed new registration platforms as well as new communication strategies to continually support and engage the populations that utilize their services.<sup>14</sup> These efforts have been shown to be successful. In the FY18 VA Outpatient Services Trust Survey Brief the results of the VA Signals Outpatient Services Survey indicates that 86.4% of Veterans trust the VA.<sup>15</sup> The performance around clinical services, investment, and trust survey are impressive, but they also provide three different means of defining and discussing trust.

The military's JOES surveys include questions that, when analyzed together, can provide insight about trust in healthcare providers and facilities, as well as trust in the Military Health System overall. On both surveys, there are questions that ask respondents to rate communication, respect, and autonomy. Additionally, respondents are asked whether they would recommend the facility. On the JOES-C survey, there are questions about the respondent's experience with appointment schedulers and other support staff, which contextualize patients'

overall experience with the provided care. Multiple approaches can be taken to understand the role of trust in patient experience. Questions directly pointing to trust, such as those included on the inpatient and outpatient VA Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patients (SHEP), could be added to the JOES surveys. Alternatively, a composite measure could be created from the items listed above that encompasses the individual components that, when combined, serve as a measure of trust in providers or facilities. With either approach, the scores of the "trust" measures can be linked to verbatims to develop deeper insights into trust in the military health system. Were this approach to be utilized there would be application across many of the Defense Health Agency surveys.

## Contact

**Seth Messinger**  
Research Scientist  
Ipsos Public Affairs  
[seth.messinger@ipsos.com](mailto:seth.messinger@ipsos.com)

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. 2016. "Restoring Trust in Veterans Health Care: Fiscal Year 2016 Annual Report.

<sup>15</sup> Veterans Experience Office. 2018. "VA Outpatient Services FY2018 Trust Survey."