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October 20, 2014

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary,

The American Statistical Association applauds the efforts of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to train its staff in the sound use of statistics. However, we regret your decision to prevent VA trainers from using the book “How to Lie with Statistics” in future training. For decades statisticians have found the content of the book to be responsible and useful, cautioning readers about the various ways in which descriptive statistics and graphs can be misused and therefore mislead.

We are aware of the graph that was criticized at the September 17 congressional hearing. Chapter 5 of “How to Lie with Statistics” warns against the very fault illustrated by the graph, demonstrating the importance of statistical training. We are also aware of the good work that has been done by statisticians within the VA.

While we understand the intense scrutiny the VA is experiencing, we see no reason to prohibit the book’s use because sound statistical practice is about substance and not about perception. Whether or not the book is used in further VA training, however, the American Statistical Association and its members are willing to assist the VA in its statistical training. We wholeheartedly support the VA’s vital mission “to fulfill President Lincoln’s promise ‘To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan’ by serving and honoring the men and women who are America’s Veterans.”

Sincerely,

David Morganstein
President-Elect, American Statistical Association