



Steven Harris  
Assistant Deputy Minister, Service  
Veterans Affairs Canada  
191 Great George Street  
Charlottetown, PE C1A 4L2

September 25, 2024

Dear Mr. Harris,

The purpose of this letter is to provide constructive feedback from the client's perspective and offer solutions to improve the process and wait times for veterans with service-related cancers.

We are a small group of veterans who developed cancer as a result of our exposure to various cancer-causing chemicals while in service. Veterans with cancer are unique among veterans in that their injuries do not present themselves at the time of exposure but are delayed, sometimes by as much as 30 years, after the injury actually occurred. What we are hearing from veterans is that the VAC process is awkward and is taking too long. As well the requirement for '*Doctors Letters*' presents a nearly impossible barrier for veterans with cancer to overcome.

In regard to the speed of the process, it's important for you to recognize that many cancers are terminal and all cancers can become terminal in time whether tumors are reduced by treatment or removed. To put our concerns in perspective I will outline my own journey, which is not unlike what we have heard from other veterans.

I applied to VAC in January 2022 while in my 73<sup>rd</sup> year. I received a negative decision in January 2024. I asked for a review and with the assistance of BPA, who '*Red-Zoned*' my file due to excessive wait time, my hearing was held in August 2024. On September 4<sup>th</sup> I was informed that I was granted an award of five-fifths for pain and suffering. I immediately submitted an updated Quality-of-Life form on September 5<sup>th</sup>. On September 23<sup>rd</sup> I received a letter providing an interim 5% award and stating that more medical information was required. When I phoned VAC to ask why they had not considered the Quality-of-Life form, I was told that it had arrived too late and was advised that it could take another two months before I was advised what additional information they were seeking. Given the turn-around time <sup>of</sup> my previous medical opinion, this additional delay will take us to at least January 2025, which will be exactly 3 years since my application in January 2022.

Although this wait time appears excessive it is not unique for veterans with cancer, I recall posting an enquiry to my account in January 2024 asking why things were taking so long.

Five months later, in May 2024, I received a phone call advising me that: *"claims involving cancers take longer"*. Given that any cancer can become terminal at any time, one would think that these claims would be prioritized in the system. Regardless, there are three changes that you could implement that would greatly speed up the process for all veterans. They are:

1. Treat veterans with the same cancers as a group and of those, treat veterans with the same exposure as a subgroup. By recognizing that these claims are identical, the process time will be shortened for all veterans;
2. Apply Regulation 50(g) more liberally to the benefit of veterans with cancer. In doing so reduce the emphasis on Doctors Letters. However, when a Doctors Letter exists tying a specific cancer to a specific exposure that letter should be applied to all veterans with the same cancer and exposure; and
3. Refer to VRAB and VAC past decisions involving delayed injuries like cancer and when presented with the same cancer resulting from the same exposure as in a past VRAB or VAC decision, recognize and apply Judicial Precedent. Don't make all veterans with identical cancers/exposures individually jump through the same hoops.

If these changes are implemented the process time for all veterans will be improved. However, there are two other suggestions we have that will reduce the frustration that veterans with cancer face. First, veterans with cancer are often preoccupied with their cancer treatment and tend to abandon the VAC process when confronted with what they sometimes perceive as an overly complex bureaucracy. This could be alleviated by assigning veterans a single point of contact that could help them navigate the process. Phone calls get you a different associate each time and submitting a message to your VAC Account doesn't get you a response in a timely manner.

Secondly, in recognition that all cancers can become terminal at any time, all veterans submitting claims involving cancers should be automatically *'Red-Zoned'* upon application. This will greatly speed up the process. No veteran with a potentially terminal, service-related illness should have to wait three years for their claim to be fully processed.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. I look forward to seeing meaningful progress for the well-being of all veterans with cancer.

Sincerely,



Commander (ret'd) James P. Hutton CD, BSc, MSc, MBA  
Director, Veterans with Cancer Inc.

cc. Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Minister of Veterans Affairs