

**H E R C**

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# VA HEALTH ECONOMICS BULLETIN

## DSS Captures Telehealth Care Cost

VA is using telehealth services to provide care for mental health, spinal cord injury, pre- and post-surgical care, and other specialized services in locations where they would otherwise not be available. The costs of health services provided by telephone and video conference are being tracked in the VA Decision Support System (DSS). The VA Decision Support Office has advised medical centers to assign costs to telephone calls if they meet the VA definition of telephone care. The call must involve a patient history and clinical decision making, and the workload must be recorded using a telephone care clinic stop. The change was made because VA expects to increase use of telephone care as part of initiatives to provide patients with primary care medical homes. It reverses a 2006 recommendation not to assign costs to telephone care. For more information, please refer to the DSS technical conversion guidelines available on the VA intranet. The FY11 conversion guidelines also describe the methods for assigning costs to video telehealth visits. Finding the cost of this care is complex because the service takes place at two locations, both at the site where the patient is located and at the provider's site.

### HERC "Econometrics with Observational Data" Course

*This course provides participants with sufficient background in econometrics to choose techniques suited both to their data and to their economic model. There will be a strong emphasis on applied work, illustrating the use of statistical software applied to VA data.*

November 3, 2010 – Paul Barnett, Ph.D.  
Cost as the Dependent Variable (Part II)

November 17, 2010 – Ciaran Phibbs, Ph.D.  
Non-linear Dependent Variables

December 1, 2010 – Ciaran Phibbs, Ph.D.  
Right Hand Side Variables

December 15, 2010 – Jean Yoon, Ph.D.  
Research Design

The schedule of upcoming cyber-seminars and courses, and information on the archives, are available on our website: <http://www.herc.research.va.gov>.

To register for these courses, visit  
[http://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/for\\_researchers/cyber\\_seminars/catalog.cfm](http://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/for_researchers/cyber_seminars/catalog.cfm)

# HERC Guidebook Updates

## *Guide on the Account Level Budgeter (ALB)*

The HERC Account Level Budgeter Guidebook has been expanded and revised to reflect major changes implemented in the ALB dataset in FY2008-2009. During FY2000-2008, the ALBCC (Account Level Budgeter - Cost Center) and ALBHR (Account Level Budgeter - Human Resources) were two separate extracts. In FY2009 these databases were merged into a single extract, the ALB NDE. New variables were added, and several variables removed in 2008 were reinstated. The new Guidebook features a documentation table listing all variables in the new ALB and updated variable descriptions. A table of all ALB files on the Austin IT Center mainframe has also been compiled with associated descriptions. In addition, new HERC format files for the SAS dataset are documented, with instructions for accessing and using the relevant files.

One new variable in the ALB dataset is particularly valuable. It's a text field that gives the locally assigned name of patient care departments. This makes it possible to find the names of the specific clinic or wards where an individual patient received care, expanding the possibilities for health services research. For every visit and hospital stay provided by VA, the DSS Intermediate Product Department files identify each department where cost was incurred. Departments are identified by a code. The new text field in ALB gives the locally assigned name for that code. Although the code is common to these two files, it is called DCM\_DEPT in the ALB file, and IPDNUM in the intermediate product department files. To find the ALB Guidebook, visit the HERC internet or intranet web sites and click on 'Publications' on the left.

## *Guide on DSS Intermediate Product Department (IPD) Files*

HERC has updated its Decision Support System (DSS) Intermediate Product Department (IPD) Guidebook. It features a revised variable list covering the variables in all files through FY2009 and a revised description of our IPD format library that includes new product departments added in FY2009. The Guidebook also notes the option of using the DSS Account Level Budgeter (ALB) format file for a local description of each IPD. The Guidebook is available on the HERC intranet web site.

## *Guide on DSS Discharge Dataset*

The FY 2009 HERC Discharge file is now available for download from the VA Austin IT Center. Its filename is RMT-PRD.HERC.DSS.SAS. If you require access to this data repository, please contact HERC at [herc@va.gov](mailto:herc@va.gov) for the functional task code. The companion Guidebook to HERC Discharge file, "HERC's DSS Discharge Dataset with Subtotals for Inpatient Categories of Care, Fiscal Year 2009," has also been updated and can be found on the HERC intranet web site. A new section in the Guidebook describes recent changes to inpatient variables and how they affected our treatment of those variables in creating the HERC Discharge file.

## *Guide on DSS National Data Extrants (NDEs)*

HERC has updated its Guidebook to the core DSS National Data Extrants (NDEs). The core NDEs feature encounter-level inpatient and outpatient records, as well as inpatient records at the level of individual treating specialty (bedsection) stays within a larger inpatient encounter. The Guidebook now covers data through FY2009 and incorporates revisions made by the VA Decision Support Office. New material in Chapter 4 explains why negative balances exist in the DSS pharmacy data. In Chapter 5 we now discuss extreme cost values in the inpatient NDEs. This information will be useful in helping researchers identify outliers when analyzing DSS data.

## *Guidebook on Person-Level Cost Data Sets*

HERC has updated its person-level datasets. These sum all spending at VA facilities for each individual who uses the VA health care system each year. Currently spanning FY1998-FY2009, these data allow researchers to determine the annual costs of individual patients without needing to extract and summarize stay and visit level information from numerous VA databases. The data are available at the Austin IT Center. To obtain a functional task code, write to HERC at [herc@va.gov](mailto:herc@va.gov).

## Health Economics Experts List

To help build a community of health economists, HERC maintains a list of health economics experts listing their geographic locations and areas of expertise. The list features more than forty VA staff members who can offer advice on a variety of topics in cost and cost-effectiveness research. Researchers who are planning a study can use this list to find a health economist to include in their funding proposal.

VA staff not currently listed on the HERC health economics experts list may request to be considered by writing to [herc@va.gov](mailto:herc@va.gov).

## HERC Staff Update

**Anjali Upadhyay** joined HERC as a Research Associate in August 2010. She earned a MS in Biostatistics from California State University, East Bay and has previously held research positions at economics research and consulting organizations. She is a newlywed who enjoys gardening in her spare time.