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[00:00:30] **Speaker 1** Senator Johnson is expected to join us next week. The Department of Veterans Affairs is in crisis. Those are the words of a retired physician of 27 years at the VA hospital in Madison. Trump administration doge cuts to VA healthcare are having real life consequences to the some nine million patients and their care teams and providers across the country. This week, Senator Baldwin held a round table in Madison with veterans, patients and employees. To hear about it.

[00:01:02] **Speaker 2** The mass firings that we have seen have had real impact. Appointments are being canceled because there is not a provider there to see them.

[00:01:17] **Speaker 3** I went out there and I was deployed, I don't know how many times, but I did it and I just called and they re-glued my feet together and I put my boots back on and I went back out there. I just enjoyed my job so much because we had the sense that our Congress, our Senate and our President and those offices would take care of us because we were taking care of what they were asking us to do.

[00:01:47] **Speaker 2** I have been getting calls where many highly service-connected, many with, you know, fragile mental health are afraid that their benefits will be taken. And I have had more than one say, oh, then I'll just kill myself. Uh-uh. It's horrifying.

[00:02:12] **Speaker 1** The retired physician at the VA in Madison, we mentioned, was also at that roundtable bringing his inside knowledge. Dr. Michael Siebers says the cuts have led to disastrous problems for veterans' health He joins us now. Dr., thanks for being here. Thank you. So we know that the VA secretary wants to cut the agency's workforce by about 83,000 employees, but vows not to take any frontline health care workers. What's your knowledge about who's been let go? Or who's leaving because of the kind of uncertainty of it all.

[00:02:45] **Speaker 4** Well, it's very hard to get exact data, but it's clear that even with the cuts that have been made so far, services have been worsened for veterans. So it's only going to get worse as time goes by.

[00:03:03] **Speaker 1** You said that there's a certain secrecy about what's happening, how so?

[00:03:08] **Speaker 4** There is a secrecy. There are Doge people that are senior advisors now working at the Veterans Administration. The leadership in the 170 different medical centers around the country have had to sign non-disclosure agreements. The people on the ground, the people working in the VA hospital, don't know what's going to happen. They're very fearful about the cuts. They're a group of people who are quite dedicated to taking care of veterans.

[00:03:40] **Speaker 1** And you have some understanding that there may be more kind of announced cuts next week.

[00:03:47] **Speaker 4** That's what I've heard, that there will be more cuts coming. I think it's pretty clear they're not at the eighty three thousand level yet and there have already been significant issues. I talked with one veteran who said when she called the hospital the phone rang and nobody answered it for an extended period of time and she ended up just hanging up. There are problems.

[00:04:15] **Speaker 1** What are some other examples of the real world consequences inside these hospitals?

[00:04:21] **Speaker 4** You know, it's been reported that some hospitals have been without police so that there hasn't been policing at the facilities. At the Middleton VA hospital where I work, they have a shortage of custodial staff so that individual persons, including secretaries and cardiovascular surgeons, are cleaning their own rooms, emptying their own waste baskets. The RNs have to clean rooms. New patients are waiting to get into the hospital while the RNs clean the rooms. The RN's are cleaning the OR and surgeries are delayed while they're doing that cleaning.

[00:05:04] **Speaker 1** So what are your former colleagues there telling you about conditions like that inside for both health care, but also morale?

[00:05:12] **Speaker 4** Morale is terrible. The fear about what's going to happen, not knowing what it's going be, the fact that there was a mandate that everybody working from home had to come to the hospital, people are jam-packed in. This happened with the suicide prevention hotline. There was no confidentiality. People were working out of closets or six at a table. So there are a lot of things that have happened that make it more difficult to deliver good medical care.

[00:05:51] **Speaker 1** I was going to ask, how should families, what should they know about what all this means for patient care?

[00:06:00] **Speaker 4** Well, it's not good. I mean, there are things that are happening that make it harder to deliver good patient care. The pattern of loss of people at the VA is primarily letting go people who are support staff, so that the physicians, they're not letting them go, the nurses, they are not letting them go although 1,700 nurses have already taken early deferred retirement. 200 doctors we know have taken early deferred retirement. There was a case where in one VA hospital, the x-rays were piling up, there was no radiologist to read them for an extended period of time. And that's a very detrimental and dangerous situation for patients.

[00:06:45] **Speaker 1** So what is the mindset of the veterans the VA cares for?

[00:06:51] **Speaker 4** Well, I think, you know, they're of two minds. There are a group of veterans, a significant group, who voted for President Trump, and think he's doing the right thing in most cases. But many have reservations in that group, and there is a group, of course, who are extremely upset about what's happening.

[00:07:14] **Speaker 1** There's also a hiring freeze. But even so, are medical professionals self-selecting out of working in VA facilities now?

[00:07:26] **Speaker 4** I think that's the case. We certainly know that nurses aren't interested in coming to work at the Middleton VA Hospital when they finish their training at Madison College.

[00:07:41] **Speaker 1** Thank you for your insight, Dr. Michael Siebers.

[00:07:44] **Speaker 4** It's my pleasure. Thank you. No, it's terrible. Yeah, it was terrible. So, you know, their whole goal, I should have said this, but their whole is to privatize all medical health care for veterans.

[00:08:04] **Speaker 1** Is that stated? I haven't seen that.

[00:08:07] **Speaker 4** It's been stated, yeah. It is pretty sub rosa at the current time. They're not, the new budget for 26 has 4% increase in the budget for the VA, but it's largely earmarked to go for care in the community with private providers. You know, the average private provider visit is like 10 to 12 minutes, you know, wouldn't probably be accurate or. Uh... Helpful for a patient who has suicidality or PTSD or homelessness

[00:08:48] **Speaker 1** Because that's the kind of care that the VA kind of has a mission toward.

[00:08:56] **Speaker 4** The mission is to take care of veterans. And if the 33,000 veterans who are homeless need help, we try to help them. If all the patients with PTSD are having trouble, we've got a system that tries to help. But we're losing psychologists, we're loosing psychiatrists. So it's becoming more difficult to take of those people.

[00:09:20] **Speaker 1** Alright, well, again, thank you. And we were just before.