The Patient Experience With the Mental Health System: A Focus on Integrated Care Solutions

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To discuss the benefits of working with a multidisciplinary team from the patient and family perspective.

SUMMARY: According to patients and their families, stigma is the primary barrier hindering treatment for depression and is followed by a web of access to care, mental health parity, and medication issues. The Mental Health Integration program strives to eliminate these barriers by emphasizing consumer- or patient-driven treatment, family support, and community-based solutions.

CONCLUSION: Working with a recovery model—"You are not alone, treatment works, recovery is possible, and there is hope"—the National Alliance on Mental Illness brings the family and consumer voice into the Mental Health Integration program, with the intention of effecting more widespread impact.

KEYWORDS: Mental health services, Access to care, Health care delivery, Multidisciplinary team


Access to Care

Access to care is another important issue with which most providers and patients are familiar. Identifying a mental health provider is often difficult, and receiving timely appointments is a...
constant struggle. In addition, financial barriers to treatment exist because many insurance companies do not cover mental health care or do not cover the benefit at a rate that patients can afford. There is an especially vulnerable population, consisting of those who do not qualify for Medicaid and yet cannot afford private mental health care, for whom access to affordable mental health care is a serious problem. With diminishing coverage for mental health care, integrated mental health care is only part of the solution—integrated coverage is required. The issue of nonparity between general medical care and mental health care perpetuates the stigma. While providers may stress that depression is like any other illness, unfortunately, there remains a difference in terms of how care is provided and financed. Patients and family members are important sources of information and can assist in the formulation of the treatment plan. Patients and family members understand the challenges of living with a mental illness and the associated stigma. With the Mental Health Integration program and its evaluation tools, these consumers are able to navigate through the system more easily.

In addition to patients and family, the community should be involved in supporting the patient and family. Patients and family members should be provided with information on how to access the resources available to them and how to connect with community members who can potentially alleviate some of their burden. Involving the community can benefit everyone on the team, including the patient, family, community, and providers. Of course, providers do not have to be expert in all of the resources available in the community—a reputable community organization, such as NAMI, can be used to form partnerships for the purpose of referrals. Information on community resources can be provided.
through brochures in waiting rooms, Web sites, mailings, and, most of all, recommendations from physicians and team members. Recommendations from providers can be extremely helpful and further reduce the stigma of seeking assistance from the community.

NAMI: Voice of Consumers and Families

NAMI offers support, education, and advocacy for the patient, the family, and the community. The role of NAMI within the Mental Health Integration program has been to bring the family and consumer voice into the program. The NAMI programs available for the Mental Health Integration program all utilize the “recovery model” and offer peer-to-peer programs for those with serious mental illness. The patient learns how to manage his or her own illness and becomes empowered to learn the skills associated with disease management. NAMI also offers family-to-family programs so families can become educated on mental illness and learn how to care for themselves while they are caring for their loved one. Patients and family mentors are available as a referral system, offering guidance to patients and their families on community resources specific to their needs. In addition, NAMI offers community education to raise awareness of mental illness and help eliminate its stigma.

NAMI’s emphasis is on recovery. Its main message is: “You are not alone, treatment works, recovery is possible, and there is hope!” In order to fully realize this hope, patients must get access to treatment and medications. With future innovations and programs in place, this hope may be realized for all patients with mental illness and their family members. For further information, go to National Alliance on Mental Illness, www.nami.org.

DISCLOSURES
This article is based on the proceedings of a symposium held on October 6, 2005, at the Academy of Managed Care Pharmacy’s 2005 Educational Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, which was sponsored by an educational grant from Wyeth. The author received an honorarium from Wyeth for participation in the symposium. She disclosed no potential bias or conflict of interest relating to this article.

REFERENCES