

Treating behavioral health to boost patients' overall outcomes

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There's an increasing recognition of the connection between the mind and body, and an understanding that integrating behavioral health care leads to better health and care for people with chronic diseases such as substance-use disorder, type 2 diabetes, hypertension and more.

Patients receiving this kind of integrated care are happier and healthier because they're tackling the root causes that negatively affect their overall health. And studies show that implementation of this approach can lead in the long run to lower costs for health care systems, payers and society as a whole.

To help physicians implement whole-patient care, the AMA established the Behavioral Health Integration (BHI) Collaborative with seven other leading medical associations. The collaborative supports physicians in overcoming obstacles to integrating behavioral and mental health care into their primary care practices and help meet the needs of more patients. The goal is for patients to receive mental health care that is coordinated by the primary care office whether in collaboration with a psychiatrist or other mental health professionals.

A recent BHI Collaborative webinar, "Bolstering Chronic Care Management with Behavioral Health Integration," explores the relationship between physical and behavioral and mental health, the impact each has on a patient's overall health and how practices can use BHI to help manage, treat and address acute and chronic conditions.

During the webinar, physician speakers shared real-world examples of how their practices have integrated behavioral health care to bolster the care they provide for patients with chronic conditions.

Internist Edwin C. Chapman, MD, discussed his Washington, D.C., practice's experiences with integrating behavioral health care to help treat adult patients, including seniors, with substance-use disorders.

Meanwhile, Chicago family physician Sreela Namboodiri, MD, shared how integrated behavioral health care at the Heartland Health Centers, a federally qualified health center with 18 locations in

Chicago, has improved her patients' lives.

Boosting substance-use disorder care

Dr. Chapman's practice focuses on patients with substance-use disorders. He treats over 200 patients with buprenorphine. About 80% adhere to their treatment program.

With restrictions on same-day care for mental health services, Dr. Chapman's patients need to come back for a second visit or participate in a remote visit to comply with payment requirements.

"So we designed a hybrid model, using telehealth and in-office treatment," he said. "We know the patients are going to come in at least once a week or once a month if they are completely compliant."

When a patient comes into the office, Dr. Chapman can offer a telehealth visit with a social worker, a peer coach, psychiatrist or psychologist, along with his other primary care services.

BHI and chronic care patients

As a primary care physician, Dr. Namboodiri sees part of her role as understanding the full context of a patient's life. In doing so, she can better focus her energy—and the patient's—on addressing the core issues at play, rather than the surface-level symptoms due to their chronic conditions. For example, when a patient feels despair, that can affect behaviors such as their relationship to food. That, in turn, can have an impact on their overall health.

"This, to me, is really the purpose of including behavioral health in primary care because addressing our emotional, our mental, our spiritual well-being is really essential for healing and treating chronic illness," she said.

Other team members are co-located in Dr. Namboodiri's office, such licensed clinical social workers who can provide additional behavioral health care in a setting that allows for easy introductions with patients. Such warm handoffs in the primary care setting help establish a quick rapport and reduce stigma surrounding behavioral health care.



To help physicians offer mental and behavioral health services their practices, the BHI Collaborative has created the Overcoming Obstacles webinar series and the Behavioral Health Integration (BHI) Compendium, a one-stop online collection of resources from eight national physician organizations designed to help you no matter where you are on your integrated health care journey.