$2-Million Grant Helps APA Train Psychologists for Integrated Health Care

Psychologists’ role in producing better health outcomes

Last year, the American Psychological Association’s Center for Psychology and Health received a three-year, $2-million grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Transforming Clinical Practice Initiative (TCPI) to help train psychologists to work within an integrated health care system.

Integrated care brings together physicians, psychologists, nurses and other clinicians working in tandem to diagnose physical and psychological health problems, plan and provide treatment, and evaluate its effectiveness.

During the three-year award period, APA will serve as a Support and Alignment Network (SAN), leading an education and workforce development project that will enroll and provide 6,000 psychologists with clinical and leadership skills needed to work in primary and specialty care practices that are implementing integrated care programs.

The TCPI is one of the largest federal investments designed to support clinician practices through collaborative peer-based learning networks. It works through its SAN awardees to achieve these goals:

- Improve the quality of care delivered
- Rapidly transform health care practices in preparation for participation in alternative payment models
- Reduce the total cost of care

The initiative is one part of a strategy advanced by the Affordable Care Act to strengthen the quality of patient care and spend health care dollars more wisely.

Benefits of the training

APA will offer interested members free online training to prepare them for working on an integrated health care team. Once training is completed, APA will help connect members with a practice transformation network – a clinic, hospital or health care practice – in their region for additional coaching, mentoring and assistance in moving into integrated care practice. Participating in this collaborative, peer-based learning ensures that these clinicians will be part of leading and creating positive change for the entire health care system.

Additional benefits include:

- Eight hours Continuing Education Credit
- High-quality training by an expert team
- Opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals
- Better positioned for change
- Opportunity to stay current
- Diversify the settings you practice in using your current skills
- Identify skill gaps and positions for success after completing the course
- Reinvigorate your work in an exciting area

Why this grant is important to psychologists

The U.S. health care system is shifting away from a model that pays physicians only to help those who are ill toward a system that emphasizes keeping people healthy and improving their health. This is demonstrated in the policies that are changing health care payments. With an increasing focus not only on the population of patients served but also for the system of professionals caring for these patients, this shift will also emphasize value and outcomes over volume. Health outcomes for people are determined more by individual behavior than most practitioners realize. Because of the Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act, health care practices will be seeing a transition to payment for quality of care and patient outcomes, and there are several ways in which psychologists can have a positive effect on those outcomes.

Some psychologists may not recognize the impact that they have on their patients’ physical health. For example,
After noticing symptoms of depression during an office visit, a family practice physician refers the patient to a psychologist. The patient is a 28-year-old mother of two children. She begins therapy with her psychologist and starts to identify several problem areas in her life: difficulty managing her children’s behavior, weight gain, trouble sleeping and anxiety about work. Her psychologist talks to her about effective problem solving techniques that can help her make positive changes in each area. These changes lead to improvement in her children’s behavior, increased physical activity and more nights of better sleep. With the psychologist’s guidance, the mother also starts setting clearer boundaries at work.

When she sees her physician six months after starting therapy, her mood has improved, she’s lost weight and her blood pressure is at a more acceptable level. Her physical health improved because she worked on several behavioral challenges with a psychologist.

Dr. Alan S. Greenglass, MD, president of Christiana Care Quality Partners in Delaware, has witnessed and been a part of positive outcomes similar to what’s described in the case study above. Greenglass practiced internal medicine and designed the integrated care model that is implemented at Christiana. When he was primary care practitioner, he referred his patients to psychologists when he picked up on signs of a behavioral or mental health issue. He says, however, that many physicians, like psychologists, are not trained to practice integrated care and remain hesitant to suggest that their patients see a psychologist. Uncertainty about referring a patient to a psychologist may stem from confusion about the reimbursement process and concerns about their patients’ reaction.

“Physicians are reluctant to ask their patients about mental health,” Greenglass says. “We need to take away the stigma that might come from saying, ‘I’d like for you to see a psychologist,’ or, ‘I need somebody to help you develop techniques so that you can manage your smoking and diabetes.’”

The best way to encourage physicians to recommend therapy when it’s needed is to educate physicians and behavioral health professionals together on the practice of integrated health care, Greenglass says.

“There is this perception that we can’t communicate much with the other specialty. Train physicians and psychologists together, side by side. Have them think of themselves as two sides of the same coin. They are trying to help each other get to the same place,” he says.

Patients can see this collaboration between their physician and psychologist. Greenglass says this could lead the patient to viewing their therapist not only as someone who is helping them with depression or another mental health issue, but also as someone who is helping them manage their physical illness.

Written by Jewel Edwards-Ashman

psychologists see clients who suffer from depression, but also have diabetes or some other chronic illness. Research from the National Institute of Mental Health shows that people living with a chronic illness are at a higher risk for depression.

In other cases, psychologists may see patients who are pregnant or first-time mothers, and counsel them on how to adapt to the major life change of raising a child for the first time, or raising multiple children.

A change in thinking about health care creates a great new opportunity for psychologists. Primary care sites are where most people go when they have mental health problems. Recognizing the role behavioral health plays in treating physical health conditions is just one way psychologists can participate in the changing health care landscape.

The Practice Organization knows that the most common mental health disorders – anxiety, depression and substance misuse – adversely affect health outcomes. The mind and body are inextricably intertwined, and the most effective way to reach people who need help can be as a member of an integrated health care team. Adapting to working on a health care team will create new learning opportunities for psychologists. It is a chance to be an ambassador for the profession, educate other health care clinicians on what psychologists do, and improve patients’ experiences and health.

Written by Toni Vincent, MPH