Perceived Needs and Barriers to Access of Mental Health Information: Patient, Family Member, and Provider Views

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ABSTRACT

Background:
In recent years, there has been a proliferation of publicly available information regarding mental health disorders. However, no systematic investigation of usage patterns or barriers to access has been conducted. This investigation sought to evaluate, in a large sample of patients, family members, and providers, sources of information most frequently accessed and recommended, as well as perceived barriers to access and utilization.

Method:
1,191 providers and 259 patients or their family members responded to surveys as part of the 2006-2007 Educational Programs of the Psychiatry Academy and Mood Disorders Institute Resource Center at the Massachusetts General Hospital. Providers responding to the survey had participated in one of ten CME events held throughout the U.S. while patients and family members had attended one of two public education programs focusing on either mood disorders or substance use disorders. Responses were evaluated using descriptive analyses and results of both surveys were compared using appropriate statistical techniques.

Results:
Patients and family members endorse medications (58.1%, 51.7%) as the topic for which they are most frequently seeking information. This group also points to their mental health practitioners (51.4%, 66.7%) as the information source they most often turn to, and feeling overwhelmed (72.9%, 31.7%) as the most significant barrier when accessing mental health information. Providers report that patients most often seek treatments (87.4%) as the topic about which patients most frequently seek information, and the source to which they most commonly refer patients is mental health literature (68.3%). In contrast to patients, providers report the greatest barrier to recommending mental health information is concerns about the quality and reliability of available information (50.4%).

Conclusions:
Both of the groups studied endorse treatments (particularly medications) as the topic about which patients most frequently seek information. Patients look to their providers as the main source of information, but providers are not certain about what sources of patient information are reliable and of high quality. Future studies are needed to identify methods for reducing barriers to getting high quality mental health information into the hands of patients and family members.

INTRODUCTION

With the lifetime prevalence of mental disorders often cited as high as 30-40%, many individuals will be affected by a debilitating condition or may find themselves caring for a family member of friend who suffers from one. It would thus follow that readily available accurate mental health information for patients and their caregivers is a necessary step in alleviating the burden on people with mental health conditions and their caregivers. Few studies have been conducted to examine the mental health information needs of patients and families, and their providers, as well as the barriers to accessing information. This study seeks to explore the mental health information needs and sources for providers, patients and their family members, as well as the barriers to accessing information. We hypothesize that significant barriers may exist that prevent patients and their family members from accessing recent and accurate information regarding mental health diagnoses, treatments, and daily management. Results of this study will help identify the subject matter and format of information that needs to be made more available to patients and families in the future.

METHOD

Study Procedures
During 2007, the Psychiatry Academy collaborated with the Mood & Anxiety Disorders Institute (MADI) Resource Center, the public education arm of the Psychiatry Department at MGH to assess patient and family member perspectives on the challenges associated with identifying and selecting mental health information that is both reliable and of high quality. Surveys were provided to participants of both the mood disorders and substance use disorders public education programs. Fifteen minutes were set aside at the beginning of the programs for participants to complete the surveys, and surveys were collected as participants completed them.

Providers received surveys at one of ten Massachusetts General Hospital Psychiatry Academy CME events held throughout the country. These educational events target community-based practitioners who provide mental health treatment, including physicians, nurses, social workers, psychologists, pharmacists, and counselors. The curriculum of the MGH Psychiatry Academy encompasses several evidence-based lectures across major therapeutic areas in mental health. Providers completed the survey forms during a break in the presentations, and the surveys were collected at the end of the event.

Statistical Analyses
Data analysis included descriptive statistics for demographics as well as responses to all survey questions. Parametric and non-parametric tests were used to evaluate the types of information utilized by providers, patients, and their family members as well as perceived barriers to information access and utilization. All data entry and analysis was carried out using STATA/SE version 9.3 for Windows.

RESULTS

Provider
The analysis included a total of 1,191 providers, averaging 159 per live event. 820 (51.3%) filled out and returned completed survey forms. The response rate (72.8%) of survey respondents remained their specialty to be general psychiatry or a related mental health field. In addition, 14.9% reported specializing in internal medicine or general practice, and 8.8% reported specializing in pediatric psychiatry.

Of the 259 individuals who completed the survey, 25.5% reported the reason for their attendance was concern for themselves, 59.3% reported that they were concerned about a friend or family member, and 15.0% stated concern for both themselves and a friend or family member. Overall, 63.6% of attendees reported that they or a friend or family member had been diagnosed with a mental health condition, and are currently receiving treatment. 18.8% of attendees reported that they or a friend or family member had been diagnosed with a mental health condition, and are not currently receiving treatment. Finally, 17.6% of attendees reported that they wonder if whether they or a friend or family member may have a mental health condition.

CONCLUSION

Both of the groups studied endorsed treatments (particularly medications) as the topic about which patients most frequently seek information. Providers look to their providers as the main source of information, but providers are not certain about what sources of patient information are reliable and of high quality. Future studies are needed to identify methods for reducing barriers to getting high quality mental health information into the hands of patients and family members.

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