

Does behavioral health integration improve primary care providers' perceptions of health-care system functioning and their own knowledge?

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Abstract Accepted for Presentation at the Society for General Internal Medicine Annual Meeting April 21, 2017

BACKGROUND: Behavioral health integration (BHI) is an increasingly employed strategy for improving patient outcomes, reducing costs, and improving patient experience. The impact of these programs on primary care providers' (PCPs') experience caring patients with mental health and substance use disorders, in particular PCPs' perceptions of behavioral health (BH)-primary care (PC) system functioning and knowledge, are poorly understood. We aimed to examine the impact of BHI on PCPs' perceptions of behavioral health BH-PC system functioning and knowledge.

METHODS: We implemented BHI based on evidence-based models consisting of seven elements: (1) Screening for mental health and substance use disorders, (2) Training of PC teams, (3) Integration of BH providers into PC teams, (4) Roll-out of unlicensed mental health care managers and establishment of a BH registry, (5) Psychiatry consult service, (6) Site-based BHI meetings, and (7) Site self assessments. The intervention was rolled out in early integration sites during two years and late integration sites during the subsequent two years. In this observational pre-post study, we administered an anonymous online survey annually to PCPs; 381 PCPs at 11 primary care clinics participated. We examined changes in perceptions with chi-square tests and Fisher's exact tests. We also conducted multivariable logistic regression analyses controlling for provider and site level characteristics.

RESULTS: The proportion of PCPs with high BH-PC systems functioning scores quadrupled from 14% to 55% ($p < 0.0001$) and high knowledge scores increased from 63 to 85% ($p < 0.001$). Larger increases were demonstrated in early integration sites during the first two years and in late integration sites during the latter two years of the survey. Adjusting for participant and site level characteristics did not change these outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS: BHI improves PCP perceptions of BH-PC system functioning and knowledge. BHI is a strategy for improving PCP experience caring for patients with mental health and substance use disorders.