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Improving Access to Mental Health in the United States

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Introduction

Improving access to mental health care is a priority for many Americans as the condition affects a significant number of people. Mental health disorders are among the most prevalent causes of disability and affect people of all ages and demographics across a population. People with mental health disorders are a burden to society due to the specialized treatment required. Mental health disorders are a significant challenge for the healthcare system that has to deal effectively with the problem. It is evident that access to mental health care is a problem a lot of people despite the facilities being available. Furthermore, people with pre-existing chronic medical conditions are more vulnerable to mental health disorders complicating the management of both conditions.

Policy makers are calling for an examination to the mental health treatment system in response to the mass shooting experienced in the country in previous years. The fact that most of the shooting are propagated by children and war veterans in a worst-case scenario situation that requires immediate attention. Federal legislations have been called for to help in strengthening community-based mental health services especially for the most vulnerable people who are children and war veterans. Federal policies such as Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act and Affordable Care Act are expected to expand insurance coverage for mental health disorders among many United States children. Apart from legislations and policies there is need for a sufficient infrastructure that will serve those who are in need of the treatment. Legislation and policies alone will not improve access if the existing mental healthcare treatment framework is broken.

Study Objectives

This study seeks to identify the challenges facing mental healthcare and establish measures that can potentially increase access to mental healthcare. The study seeks to examine the following objectives:

1. Identify the barriers to accessing mental healthcare.
2. Identify potential improvements in mental healthcare.
3. Analyze the impact of policy changes and payment models on access to mental health care.

Method

Building on analyses completed by the Institute of Medicine, the review is aimed at identifying the barriers to accessing mental health care and establishing measures that can potentially increase access to mental healthcare. The study examines those factors that can potentially improve access to mental healthcare treatment. The study analyzes the changes in payment and competition. Health Affairs 35(6):1029-1035. doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2016.0012.

Findings

1. Barriers To Accessible Mental Healthcare
   a. Fragmented Care System
   b. Unfavorable Payment Models

2. Potential Improvements in Mental Healthcare
   a. Integration of Health care Systems
   b. Insurance Expansion and Mental Health Parity
   c. Changing Approaches to Payment methods

Barriers To Accessible Mental Healthcare

- Fragmented Care System
  - In order to make the necessary improvements in mental healthcare it is important to understand the barriers that hinder the healthcare system. The first problem is a fragmented healthcare system. Mental health has two aspects to it, medical and behavioral depending on what a patient exhibits. A patient with both behavioral and medical conditions has to interact with separate systems of healthcare. That is a medical care system and a mental health care system. Each system has its own culture, regulations, financial incentives and priorities with each focusing on delivering a specific key of services (Melek et al., 2014). This leads to overlooking of the key aspects on how to effectively treat the patient and ensure the road to recovery is smooth and specifically focusing on the needs of the patient.
  - Underprepared and Poorly Distributed Workforce
  - Mental healthcare requires a wide variety of professionals for effective care. Unfortunately that is not the case in America as the system is underweighted, poorly distributed and overworked. The available providers lack the specific skills and expertise to offer effective and integrated care.
  - Racial, ethnic and geographic diversity of the workforce is lacking making the distribution of professionals very skewed. This limits access of mental health care for poor and impoverished people. The Association of American Medical Colleges have identified psychiatry as one of the skilled professions that has a shortfall and predict that by 2025 the deficit will be much worse (HHS, 2015).
  - The current national infrastructure does not offer any hope for the field to produce more psychiatrist since only 1,737 medical school graduates matched to psychiatry in 2016 (NRMP, 2016). The trend is also reported in other professional fields that offer mental health care.

Unfavorable Payment Models

- The most prevalent payment method in the healthcare system is the fee-for-service (FFS) system. This payment does not provide flexibility for providers to cater for a coordinated care effectively since essential elements of integrated care are not reimbursed. Mental healthcare services especially behavioral conditions are not valued by the FFS system. Bundled and capitated payment model have more flexibility in medical resource when offering mental health care and they also allow for coordinated care for patients.
  - However, payment systems come into play when specializing treatment for each patient. This means that the cost of treatment varies for each patient.

Potential Improvements in Mental Healthcare

1. Integration of Health care Systems
   - Fragmentation in the healthcare system some services search as mental health care are hard to come by. However, due to business integration which has become a driving force in consolidating various providers to provide various services under one entity, hospitals and various entities providing healthcare are merging to interact more closely and provide healthcare solution to the people. This merging encourage scale and scope in service provision. Federal policy initiatives have also played a role in encouraging merging and integration by giving financial incentives for providers to integrate.

2. Insurance Expansion and Mental Health Parity
   - Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) has led to an increase in the number of people covered by health insurance facilitating improvements in the care for people with mental conditions. ACA stipulates that insurance policies should include a cover for mental health services. Health parity laws have ensured that insurers do not put greater financial requirements on mental health services than what is placed on medical care services for an insurance policy provided. Putting such measures in place will ensure there is financial accessibility to a wide array of mental healthcare services to many people.

3. Changing Approaches to Payment methods
   - The biggest challenge in payment is finding the fair amount of money to be paid for the service offered. Thus payers and provider agencies should have payment amount that is reasonable and adequate for evidence of cost effectiveness. Payment model should be based on the good outcomes rather than the volume of service offered. This will ensure that the payer is willing to pay.

References


Conclusion

The healthcare sector faces a lot of challenges as it struggles to improve access to mental healthcare for many Americans coping with the condition. Recovery from mental conditions might be a lifelong process but with accessible healthcare the outcomes might be very promising and probably make better and easier the lives of people living with the condition. Clinical and policy strategies hold the potential for making significant improvement in access to mental healthcare. The knowledge and information that is needed is available and what remains is putting it into action.