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OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire

Mental Health & Chemical Dependency Services

Polaris Receives \$1 Million Grant to Expand College Outcomes Management System

On June 9, 2010, Polaris Health Directions (Polaris) announced it had been awarded a three-year, \$1 million grant by the National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA) to further develop its College Outcomes Management System (COMS). COMS is an automated behavioral health assessment that is intended to integrate into existing electronic health record systems, and designed to detect psychosocial problems and substance abuse among students while supporting clinical decision making and tracking students' treatment progress. Polaris indicated that it planned to use the funding to field test an abbreviated version of COMS for use in college health centers and to build predictive models to determine a student's likely response to treatment and risk of dropping out of college.

Polaris has planned to conduct the COMS field test at four colleges and universities, to assist students referred for counseling and students seeking referrals. After logging into a secure web site to complete the COMS assessment, in the case of referred students, the system was designed to immediately generate a report for the counselors to help them determine the severity of the student's problems. For students who have not initiated contact with a counselor, COMS has been designed to provide a list of referrals for counselors on- and off-campus.

The grant award was the result of a competitive grant application, "PHS 2010-02 Omnibus Solicitation of the NIH, CDC, FDA and ACF for Small Business Innovation Research Grant Applications (Parent SBIR [R43/R44])," released January 15, 2010. The COMS project is intended to provide the following functions:

- Behavioral healthcare screening and clinical decision support: COMS will help to identify students suffering from serious behavioral health (mental health, substance abuse) disorders, or at risk for life threatening conditions such as eating disorders, self-harm (such as cutting), and suicidality
- Effective screening for chemical dependency linked to appropriate interventions: COMS will enable college counseling centers (CCCs) to fully integrate screening with Motivational Enhancement Interviewing promoting readiness to change among a population that considers heavy drinking and drug use to be normative
- Multivariate severity ("case mix") adjustment, allowing for valid comparisons of treatment outcomes across programs and meaningful quality improvement initiatives
- Continual enhancement of its ability to evaluate "what works for whom," as its database of patient characteristics, treatments and outcomes expands
- Population screening (anonymous): COMS will be made available on the CCC website to support its outreach function. Students who complete the COMS assessment will receive self-help materials; tailored lists of college, local (e.g., AA/NA groups), and national resources (hotlines, links to NIDA, NIAAA and NIMH web sites); and the offer of a dynamic referral to the CCC, college health centers (CHCs), or local provider organizations

- Assessment of risk for dropout
- Utility for research

Polaris has targeted the following specific goals for Phase II:

- Develop data quality indicators
- Automate the monitoring assessment and report
- Provide remote and anonymous web access
- Develop and field test COMS for CHCs
- Derive predictive algorithms for treatment response and college dropout
- Integrate COMS into an electronic practice management system

Provide dynamic referral, self-help and lists of tailored resources. Privately-owned Polaris has been developing and marketing behavioral health outcomes assessment and management systems since 1997. Its clients have included health care providers, managed care organizations, government agencies, and pharmaceutical companies. The company has focused on markets where mental health conditions negatively affect an individual's physical health or social welfare.

For more information or to discuss participation in the field test, contact: Grant Grissom, Ph.D., Principal Investigator, President and Chief Executive Officer, Polaris Health Directions, 444 Oxford Valley Road, Suite 300, Langorne, Pennsylvania 19047; 215-359-3912; E- mail: moreinfo@polarishealth.com; Web site: www.polarishealth.com.

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