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OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire
Strategic Health Care News

Polaris Begins Commercial Development of Mental Health Assessment System for Oncology

On August 13, 2010, Polaris Health Directions, in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, launched the development of a behavioral health assessment system for cancer patients. The system, called the Mental Health Assessment and Dynamic Referral System for Oncology (MHADRO), has been tentatively slated for commercial release during the first quarter of 2011.

MHADRO has been designed to provide patients with a report that is tailored to their condition and concerns. The report also includes motivational messages, in which patients can find self-help or treatment resources, and provides an automatic referral for those interested in formal treatment or support groups. Polaris Health Directions designed MHADRO as a computerized clinical decision support system for patients being treated for cancer to help physicians screen and monitor patients for the following:

- Presence of depression, anxiety, and other mental health symptoms
- Presence of cancer-related physical symptoms and side effects
- Quality of the relationship between the physician and the patient
- Presence of potential barriers to treatment
- Adherence to the medical regimen and lifestyle change recommendations

Early testing of MHADRO indicated that it helped oncologists identify and manage distressed patients. It also helped in the promotion of social support, self-help, and treatment engagement for behavioral health conditions, including depression, anxiety, social isolation, and smoking. The initial testing, supported by a grant from the U.S. National Institute for Mental Health, involved assessments of 101 patients with cancer at the Cooper Hospital's Cancer Institute. For nearly half of the patients (48 individuals), the oncologists said the Healthcare Provider Report had information that had not been assessed during the individual's medical examination. For 22 patients, the oncologists said the new information changed how they managed the patient. The MHADRO results indentified 61 patients whose assessments revealed a level of distress unusually severe for cancer patients. Their oncologists reported that 30 of these individuals received referrals for further treatment that would not have been provided under routine clinical care.

To augment the commercial development process, starting in the fall of 2010, the MHADRO will be tested with 1,000 patients at three sites: the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, in Worcester, Massachusetts; Cooper University Hospital, in Camden, New Jersey; and the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, in Houston, Texas. The testing design has called for half the patient participants to be assigned to an intervention group that will receive mental health assessments, interaction, and referrals to further treatment via the MHADRO system. The remaining 500 patient participants will be assigned to a control

group; they will also receive regular mental health assessments, but will otherwise receive treatment as usual and their assessment reports will not be available to the medical staff. The study design set the assessment schedule at two months, six months, and at 12 months following enrollment.

OPEN MINDS asked Polaris Health Directions if any entities reimbursed for the use of the MHADRO system for assessments. Polaris Health Directions' principal investigator Grant Grissom, Ph.D., indicated that Medicare, Medicaid, and many commercial health plans have reimbursement policies for behavioral health assessments, which can cover the use of MHADRO as part of a full behavioral health assessment done by a qualified behavioral health professional. For patients with cancer, an initial assessment with MHADRO would use Current Procedural Terminology code 96150. Depending on the payer policies, subsequent assessments may be covered under other 9615x codes; however, the behavioral health diagnosis must be secondary to the primary cancer diagnosis.

Polaris Health Directions has also been developing a computerized clinical decision support system for use by colleges in addition to five other projects in development. *OPEN MINDS* reported on the status of the college assessment system in "Polaris Receives \$1 Million Grant to Expand College Outcomes Management System," which published on July 12, 2010. The article may be viewed on-line at www.openminds.com/circlehome/eprint/omol/2010/071210mhcd2.htm.

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