

Title: Barriers to Mental Healthcare for Vulnerable Populations: Lessons Learned from Online Public Testimonies to Improve Medical Education

Authors

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Abstract

Background

The barriers faced by communities in seeking mental healthcare is not well understood. Elucidating the barriers can inform medical school curricula to prepare trainees to provide high quality, patient-centered care. This community-based study sought to describe the impact of the current mental health system on patient and family wellbeing and identify the barriers faced by community members attempting to access mental health care.

Methods

Sixty-nine online public testimonies were retrieved from the Colorado Department of Human Services Behavioral Health Task Force from September 2019 through March 2020. Researchers transcribed audio-video recordings, developed a codebook validated by a community advisory board, and used qualitative thematic analysis to characterize community member experiences.

Findings

The analysis identified four primary barriers. Common structural barriers include political and socioeconomic barriers. Social inequities included stigma, poor education, and lack of awareness of available resources. Population-specific needs were identified among the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing, incarcerated persons, those experiencing homelessness, and patients suffering from substance use disorders. Training and educational barriers identified in the analysis included lack of cultural awareness, identifying, and diagnosing complex illnesses, and care coordination. Barriers that can be mitigated through medical education were identified, and over 65 solutions were brainstormed using a formal qualitative research approach and organized into 6 categories: 1) education; 2) research; 3) advocacy; 4) project initiatives; 5) community partnerships; and 6) clinical care.

Interpretations

This study highlights the importance of integrating the experiences of caregivers navigating the complexities of the mental healthcare system into medical education. The results of this study hold significant potential for enhancing the effectiveness of the mental healthcare system, preparing students to provide patient-centered care, and potentially mobilizing these future physicians to contribute to a space that has historically suffered from marginalization and stigma, inadequate support, understaffing, and insufficient funding.

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