



on the frontlines

Primary care
screenings advance
mental health treatment

Depression or anxiety can strike anyone, but millions of people with mental illness never get treatment. And the statistics for those suffering from alcohol and substance misuse are especially dire: Up to 90 percent of individuals are not receiving treatment for their substance misuse, according to a 2016 report by former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD.

According to Thomas Zaubler, MD, chairman, Department of Psychiatry, Morristown Medical Center, barriers to care include stigmas associated with mental illness or substance misuse, a lack of psychiatrists and mental health professionals, and access to affordable care. But a program at Atlantic Health System aims to fill the gap in outpatient psychiatric care by integrating mental health and substance misuse screening and treatment into the primary care setting.

“Eighty percent of antidepressant prescriptions are written by primary care doctors because there are simply not enough mental health professionals to treat psychiatric illnesses,” says Dr. Zaubler. “In our program, each patient is screened for depression, anxiety and other psychiatric issues. A supervising psychiatrist reviews and makes recommendations for patients who need medication, and the primary care doctor does the prescribing.”

AN INTEGRATED CARE MODEL

Dr. Zaubler says a full-time master’s prepared clinician provides psychotherapy services as well as care coordination for those patients also being treated for a medical condition such as diabetes or heart disease. “They track patients to make sure that their depression or anxiety is getting better so no one falls through the cracks.”

Physicians also screen patients for alcohol and substance misuse, and those needing treatment meet with a clinician. If patients need a higher level of care, they are referred to an Atlantic Health System outpatient treatment program or a rehab facility.

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This collaborative care model is being integrated into a pediatric primary care site and is expected to expand to additional adult primary care practices over the next several years. Dr. Zaubler says patients like having the service integrated with their primary care treatment.

“Patients are thrilled and the doctors love it, so the feedback is very positive. We have patients who probably have never received any care for their depression or anxiety before this program. We see this as the future of mental health care.” ▶

ATLANTIC MEDICAL GROUP

Dr. Zaubler is part of Atlantic Medical Group, a multispecialty network of health care providers. For more information, visit atlanticmedicalgroupnj.org.



New Inpatient Psychiatric Unit Offers Expanded Care

One of the many challenges in treating those with mental health disorders is access to care. The new Head Family Inpatient Psychiatric and Behavioral Health Center at Morristown Medical Center will increase the number of patient beds in order to provide treatment for more patients with co-occurring medical and psychiatric problems.

“We initially had a 16-bed unit built in 1961 that was quite antiquated and very small, with little room for recreational activities. We provided excellent care, but the environment was not commensurate with the quality of care we were providing,” says Dr. Zaubler. “The new center, pending approval by the state, will be able to accommodate 24 beds, with eight doubles and eight singles and beautiful communal spaces. It’s a much more inviting therapeutic milieu, where we can tailor the treatment, therapeutic and recreational needs of the patient.”

Dr. Zaubler says there is a shortage of psychiatric beds nationally that can accommodate patients with both medical and psychiatric issues. “Many psychiatric units won’t admit someone who requires intravenous fluid or oxygen supplementation because those can be precarious on a unit, as we’re careful about not having anything where a patient could harm themselves.”

Inpatient mental health services are available at the Head Family Center at Morristown Medical Center, as well as at Overlook and Newton medical centers.