

Psychology Program Development in an Interdisciplinary Specialty Medical Evaluation: Example of the Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence

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Submission form questions and responses

Supply Body of Abstract

Mental health concerns are common among patients with respiratory diagnoses, and psychiatric symptoms are associated with poorer physical health outcomes among those with respiratory disorders¹⁻⁴. Military deployment is a precursor to increased risk of mental health diagnosis⁵, and among veterans from recent conflicts, there is an association between mental health diagnosis and increased likelihood of respiratory diagnosis⁶. The VA Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence-WRIISC Airborne Hazards Registry (AWARE) program was launched in 2019 to examine health conditions and improve care for veterans with toxic exposure respiratory concerns. Veterans invited to AWARE undergo a comprehensive interdisciplinary evaluation focused on respiratory concerns. Given the association between respiratory and mental health diagnoses, when developing the AWARE program, there was a need to determine whether a psychology assessment would be acceptable to participants and contribute relevant clinical information to the respiratory evaluation.

A brief behavioral health assessment was proposed focusing on 1) acute safety concerns, 2) the effect of respiratory symptoms on functioning, and 3) identification of resources or areas for further assessment at the home VA. AWARE participants have been receptive to the psychology visit, and have described ways in which respiratory concerns have affected quality of life in varying degrees. Veterans often cite additional health and functioning concerns (e.g., memory, pain, sleep) and are interested in resources for follow-up care at their home VA. The behavioral health assessment allows for dedicated time to screen for and follow up on acute mental health concerns, including suicidality. In conclusion, veterans presenting for an interdisciplinary respiratory evaluation are willing to participate in and interested in resources from a brief behavioral health assessment. The majority report needs in addition to respiratory concerns, thus, it is not sufficient for specialty care to assume that the veteran's needs are already being met. Psychology observations contribute to the team's ability to present the patient's symptoms, strengths, and self-management strategies in a way that empowers the patient to implement recommendations at their local VA. A focus on safety and current functioning in the context of respiratory concerns is an effective frame for the psychology visit.

Learning Outcomes

1. Discuss reasons for considering a brief behavioral health assessment as part of an interdisciplinary specialty medical evaluation program;
2. Identify ways in which a behavioral health assessment can contribute to specialty interdisciplinary care; and
3. Describe a possible psychology program model for other interdisciplinary medical programs considering incorporation of a behavioral health assessment.

Are you an AMSUS Member?

No

Are you a student?

No

Service or Agency

Department of Veterans Affairs

If Other please add your service/agency/affiliation

No response