

Telepsychiatry initiative shows promising results

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A statewide telepsychiatry initiative in South Carolina is changing the way that emergency psychiatric patients are treated, and preliminary results are encouraging.

The program, which is the first of its kind in the nation, uses [telecommunication](#) and information technologies to connect patients in need of urgent care with [psychiatrists](#) who can diagnose and prescribe immediate treatment. It is a public, private academic partnership involving the S.C. Department of [Mental Health](#), University of South Carolina School of Medicine, S.C. Hospital Association and [Medicaid](#).

“Telepsychiatry is one of the most effective uses of telemedicine,” Dr. Meera Narasimhan, chair of the USC medical school’s department of neuropsychiatry and behavioral science, said. “We are very encouraged by the outcomes of this innovative program. It has improved access and affordability, resulted in cost savings for our state and improved the quality of mental health care for the citizens of this state.”

A typical telepsychiatric consultation takes about 30 – 45 minutes via video conferencing, after which the psychiatrist transmits notes and recommendations to a local mental health center and then to the hospital.

In a largely rural state such as South Carolina, which has only 10 – 12 psychiatrists per 100,000, a number well below the national average, telepsychiatry eliminates barriers created by distance and prevents patients from languishing in an emergency room before being diagnosed

and treated, Narasimhan said.

“With telepsychiatry, the time spent in an emergency room is reduced, and assessment and recommendations occur in real time,” Narasimhan said. “The sooner we can treat patients, the shorter their hospital stay will be, and the sooner patients can return to their communities.”

Study results show:

- More than 80 percent of patients responded that they were satisfied with the process and services that they received;
- 84.1 percent of ER staff and physicians said telepsychiatry improved patient care; 90.9 percent reported that they were satisfied with the procedures, and 84.3 said they were satisfied with technology;
- Length of hospital stays were reduced;
- 84.7 percent of patients followed up with treatment plan within 30 days, and 87.2 percent followed up within 90 days.
- More than 7,500 patients have been treated since the project was implemented in March 2009. Twenty-two hospitals are participating, and the goal is to have 12 more hospitals by Dec. 31.

Participating hospitals include Greenwood, Greenville Hospital System, Medical University of South Carolina, Roper, Tuomey Regional Medical Center in Sumter, Greenwood and Spartanburg Regional Hospital.

“This has the potential to revolutionize and improve patient care,” she said. “One-quarter of Americans have some form of mental illness, and depression is the second-largest public health problem in the United States. Ultimately, this is about saving lives and improving quality of life for patients and their families.”

Provided by University of South Carolina

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