

Innovative collaborations are improving mental health care

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Family physicians and health care organizations have been keeping an eye on mental health trends since the start of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Concerning trends have included delays in patients seeking care for existing needs and patients not being able to connect well virtually, as well as new illness brought on by heightened feelings of isolation, anxiety, and fear. In a Canadian survey released this summer, 84% of respondents indicated their mental health had worsened during the pandemic.¹

When faced with worrying statistics such as this, stories about efforts under way to improve mental health care in our country can provide inspiration and hope. I am pleased to announce the CFPC is releasing a new issue of the Innovation in Primary Care series this fall that was developed with the Canadian Psychiatric Association and the Canadian Psychological Association.² It focuses on the unique efforts across Canada that demonstrate how interprofessional collaboration can enhance access to mental health care and improve outcomes for patients.

We know when patients seek care for mental health concerns, family physicians are often their first point of contact with the health care system.³ However, many family doctors have expressed that they lack the confidence or expertise to treat and manage patients who are experiencing mental health challenges.⁴ An interdisciplinary approach to care through the combined effort of family physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, and other health care providers has long been regarded as a way to provide more coordinated services and better mental health outcomes.⁵ Unfortunately, obstacles exist in the implementation of these strategies.

In the new Innovation in Primary Care report, we highlight 7 case studies from various parts of the country that we can learn from, and I will provide a few examples here²:

- An interdisciplinary practice in Nova Scotia created a model of care that integrated a mental health counselor as part of the team to enhance the timeliness of mental health care referrals for patients.
- Indigenous Cree communities in northern Manitoba have benefited from a psychiatric referral service

program that aimed to address the poor coordination of care related to frequent medical staff turnover. Mental health assessment, treatment, and monitoring have been improved through the coordination of local nursing station staff, clinicians who visit at regular intervals, and psychiatrists who provide telemedicine.

- In British Columbia, the Foundry initiative⁶ adopted an evidence-based, stepped-care approach to address unmet mental health service needs among young people. The high level of patient satisfaction and the positive outcomes have led to expansion of the concept, and many communities in the province have applied to open new Foundry centres.

The report acknowledges that the case studies were collected before the start of the pandemic, which means considerations related to COVID-19, such as providing services virtually, were not addressed specifically. The pandemic has likely spawned innovation that we can hope to learn from in the future.

In the meantime, I invite you to read this new resource. It might give you ideas about how you can enhance the care your team provides, spark thoughts about how to connect with other health care providers in your network, and raise your spirits as we continue to navigate the uncertain terrain of the pandemic. 🌱

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Cet article se trouve aussi en français à la page 778.