

EP06.02

Brief psychiatric interventions in primary care as a model for improving communication and diagnostic skills

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Background & Aim: Mental health disorders are among the most common diseases seen in primary care. However, family doctors do not always receive sufficient training to take care of patients with mental health disorders. In the Department of Ambulatory Care and Community Medicine at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland), residents are trained to provide continuous and holistic care for their patients. If these patients present undifferentiated or complex mental health symptoms, residents can request a brief psychiatric intervention, provided in cooperation with a psychiatrist. The aim of this study was to analyze the role of brief psychotherapeutic interventions as a method for teaching communication and diagnostic skills to residents while caring for patients with undifferentiated or complex mental health disorders.

Methods: A mixed-methods observational study was conducted during 2015. The number of patients, diagnoses and interactions between physicians were analyzed. A focus group with five residents was conducted by a sociologist to ascertain the impact of the interactions with psychiatrists and their interventions on the residents' training.

Results: 78 brief interventions were conducted during 2015. Residents unanimously felt that the direct participation of psychiatrists in their consultations increases their communication and diagnostic skills in undifferentiated or complex mental health disorders. Although the interventions were brief (maximum of 4 encounters) and sometimes difficult to schedule, residents consider them as being very relevant to their training. The interventions were perceived positively by patients and as having improved the relationship between the residents and their patients.

Conclusions: Brief psychotherapeutic interventions, conducted in cooperation with a psychiatrist, are considered by general practice residents as a valuable method to enhance communication and diagnostic skills of undifferentiated or complex mental health disorders.