



Association of VA Psychologist Leaders

Essential Healthcare for Veterans: Psychologists Improve Lives

SUBSTANCE ABUSE: THE NATION'S NUMBER ONE HEALTH PROBLEM

The most prevalent health and mental health problem in the U.S. is substance abuse. The abuse of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco is the cause of more deaths, illnesses, and disabilities than any other preventable health condition, and seriously undermines Americans' family life, economy, and public safety.¹

- ◆ In FY 2000, 21% of the VHA inpatients had a primary or secondary diagnosis of substance use disorder (SUD) and accounted for 1.20 million inpatient days.²
- ◆ Of the 3.64 million VHA outpatients treated in FY 2000, 9% had a SUD diagnosis and accounted for 14% of VHA outpatient utilization.²
- ◆ Among veterans assessed in VHA substance abuse treatment programs in 1997, 64% had one or more psychiatric diagnoses in addition to their SUD.³

More than half of heavy drinking veterans reported needing alcohol treatment services, but fewer than 1 in 5 of them said they usually or always received the needed services.⁴

Psychologists have developed and evaluated most of the empirically supported psychosocial treatments for substance use disorders identified in the VHA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline, including behavioral marital therapy, cognitive-behavioral coping skills training, community reinforcement approaches, motivational enhancement therapy and 12-Step facilitation training.⁵

Psychologists receive extensive training to assess and manage the multiple comorbid mental conditions that commonly occur among patients with substance use disorders.⁶

Psychologists lead 28% of VA specialty substance abuse treatment programs and provide staff supervision and training at most other programs, yet 26% of programs report no dedicated psychology services.⁷

Psychologists are trained in evidence-based treatments for substance use disorders and comorbid mental conditions.⁸ Therefore, in order to provide the highest quality of care, psychologists should be members of specialty substance abuse treatment teams and psychological interventions should be included in the treatment plans of veterans with substance use disorders.

See other side for references.

¹ Institute for Health Policy (2001). Substance Abuse: The Nation's Number One Health Problem: Key Indicators for Policy. Princeton, NJ, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
http://www.rwjf.org/app/rw_substance_abuse/rw_res_sa_chartbook.html

² Piette, J. D., Baisden, K. L., & Moos, R. H. (2001). Health Services for VA Substance Abuse and Psychiatric Patients: Trends in Utilization from Fiscal Years 1995 to 2000. Palo Alto, CA: U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs Program Evaluation and Resource Center and Health Services Research and Development Center for Health Care Evaluation.

³ Moos, R. H., Finney, J. W., Federman, E. B., et al. (2000). Specialty mental health care improves patients' outcomes: findings from a nationwide program to monitor the quality of care for patients with substance use disorders. Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 61, 704-713.

⁴ 1999 Large Health Survey of VHA Enrollees: Alcohol consumption and services. January 2002.
http://vaww.oqp.med.va.gov/oqp_services/functional_assessments/func_assess.asp

⁵ http://www.oqp.med.va.gov/cpg/SUD/SUD_Base.htm

⁶ Miller, W.R. & Brown, S.A. (1997). Why psychologists should treat alcohol and drug problems. American Psychologist, 52, 1269-1279.

⁷ Willenbring, M.L., Kivlahan, D.R., Grillo, M. (2001) Evidence-based clinical practice guidelines in substance use disorders: A survey of VA substance abuse program leaders. Palo Alto, CA: QUERI Substance Abuse Module.
http://vaww.mentalhealth.med.va.gov/substance_use.htm

⁸ Hester & Miller (1995). *Handbook of alcoholism treatment approaches: Effective Alternatives*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.