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Recognizing the Signs of Depression, Identifying It, and Treating It

Dr. Ashok Kumar[1]*, Dr. Shivani Bansal[2], Dr. Ravi Kumar[3]

1. Professor, Department of General Medicine, Santosh Medical College & Hospital, Santosh Deemed to be University, Ghaziabad.
2. Professor, Department of General Medicine, Santosh Medical College & Hospital, Santosh Deemed to be University, Ghaziabad.
3. Assistant Professor, Department of General Medicine, Santosh Medical College & Hospital, Santosh Deemed to be University, Ghaziabad.

*Dr. Ashok Kumar – Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVES: Examining Recent Epidemiological findings depression's prevalence, diagnostic processes, co-occurring conditions, and treatments, especially in primary care, and to identify roadblocks obstacles the identification, diagnosis, and optimum administration of depression in routine medical care, and to provide a synopsis of current initiatives aimed at lowering these barriers.

DESIGN: Depressive disorders in primary care settings; their epidemiology; their co-occurrence; their diagnosis; their costs and outcomes; and their treatment; these are all topics that were researched and documented in scholarly articles published over the past decade. Select articles were read and summarised based on their relevance to the goal.

CONCLUSIONS: Suffering, functional impairment, higher risk of suicide, increased costs in health care, and lost productivity are just few of the outcomes of depression's regular occurrence. Both isolated cases of depression and depression that occurs in conjunction with other medical issues can be effectively treated. Many patients with depression who present to primary care clinics are good candidates for in-house treatment. In basic care settings, only about half of patients with depression receive an accurate diagnosis and treatment. When effective treatments are used, patients fare well in the short term. Stigma, patient somatization and denial, physician knowledge and skill gaps, lack of time, scarcity of available providers and treatments, inadequate third-party coverage, and limitations on specialist, drug, and psychotherapeutic care all stand in the way of an accurate diagnosis and effective treatment of depression. We need better destigmatization and access to mental health care, as well as public and professional education campaigns, to break down these barriers.

KEYWORDS: depression; mental health; knowledge, attitudes, practice; health service accessibility; comorbidity

This report summarises current attempts to address these hurdles and provides an overview of recent discoveries on the epidemiology, burden, diagnosis, comorbidity, and treatment of depression, with a focus on general medical settings.In 1991, the American Medical

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Association's Council on Scientific Affairs released a series of publications addressing depression.[1]

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Depressive disorders in primary care settings; their epidemiology; their co-occurrence; their diagnosis; their costs and results; and their treatment; were the subjects of a series of MEDLINE searches done over the past decade. Select articles were read and summarised based on their relevance to the goal.

Most studies have focused on major depression since it is the most common form of depression. Mixed depressive-anxiety states and dysthymic disorder (chronic depression) are equally common in general medical settings but have received much less research.

As with other studies, the majority of them have been conducted on adult populations, though this study does mention a few instances when data on children is available. Research on therapy, however, has primarily been undertaken in specialised mental health settings, while the majority of research on comorbidity has been conducted in primary care settings.

EPIDEMIOLOGY IN GENERAL MEDICAL SETTINGS

In the general population, depressive disorders are quite frequent, with a point prevalence of between 2% and 4% for serious depressions.[1-2] and a lifetime risk of serious depression or dysthymic disorder of around 20%.[3,4] Women experience depression at a rate that is two-to-three times higher than men.[5]

These results originate from extensive community-based interviews. Nearly 75% of Americans who seek therapy for depression do not consult a psychiatrist or psychologist, but rather a general practitioner. Dysphoria is not the most common presenting problem in primary care, but rather sleep disturbances, exhaustion, and pain.[6] Overall, serious depression affects between 10 and 14 percent of hospitalised patients and 5 to 10 percent of outpatients seeking primary care.[7]

In another study, over a thousand people who tested positive for serious depression on a diagnostic screen were followed up with a psychiatric evaluation in the context of general care.

Seventy percent of these patients had primary care-treatable cases of major depression, thirteen percent had major depression but needed therapy from the specialised sector, and seventeen percent had conditions other than major depression. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of patients with major depression who were appropriate for primary care treatment also met criteria for another Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM-IV) axis I disorder (most commonly generalised anxiety or panic disorder), and 68% were deemed to have an axis II (personality) disorder. Many participants in the study reported having suffered from serious depression in the past. The prevalence of instances amenable to therapy in a primary care context, the necessity to inquire about a previous history of depression, and the high rates at

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which other mental diseases co-occur with depression are all illustrated by this study, as are the benefits and limitations of screening.

BURDEN

Patient discomfort, family turmoil, cognitive delays in infants and toddlers due to postpartum depression, [11] and a significantly elevated risk of suicide are all well-known costs of depression. Functional impairment and financial costs have been the focus of contemporary research. Patients with several chronic conditions had their physical functioning assessed as part of the Medical Outcomes Study. The functional ratings of depressed patients were similar to those of patients with advanced coronary artery disease, which were lower than the functioning scores of patients with any of the other illnesses examined. [12]

Researchers from the World Health Organization concluded that unipolar major depression is the largest cause of disability due to its high incidence, chronic or recurrent course, and frequent early start.[13] In the case of functional improvement, effective treatment is responsible.The annual price tag for depression in the US is put at $43 billion.[14]

About 70% of the price tag comes from lost workdays and untimely deaths, while the remaining 10% comes from medical expenses. It is estimated that the annual cost to businesses of employing a depressed worker is $6,000.[15]

DIAGNOSIS

Major depressive disorder can only be properly diagnosed with a series of clinical tests. The diagnosis is reached after a thorough clinical interview and evaluation of the patient's mental state, as is the case with the vast majority of psychiatric diseases. There is strong evidence that such an interview has the same sensitivity and specificity as a number of standard medical tests performed in a laboratory or by radiology. Typically, a doctor will use the DSM-diagnostic IV's criteria as a starting point. When diagnosing major depression, it is important to rule out other possible causes, such as other psychiatric disorders (such as OCD, panic disorder, bulimia nervosa, or dementia), general medical conditions, medications, or a substance use disorder, based on the patient's medical history and physical examination.

Several depression screening methods are available to help doctors find their depressed patients. Most depression screening tools are sensitive but not overly specific in making diagnoses.

Most experts recommend screening for depression when a physician has a strong suspicion that their patient is suffering from the illness, such as the presence of one or more classic depressive symptoms, unexplained physical symptoms, impaired functioning, or subjective distress that is out of proportion to the patient's objective medical or psychological status. To properly diagnose their patients, doctors need to understand the significance of specific screening results and the importance of conducting additional clinical assessment. In people who are showing no signs of depression, there is no need for screening.[20,21]

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The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Primary Care Version, contains condensed diagnostic criteria for the most prevalent mental disorders treated in primary care settings, such as depression.[22]

It also has algorithms that use a patient's symptoms to narrow down a diagnosis. The American Academy of Pediatrics has created a child-friendly adaptation of the manual.[23]

The World Health Organization has created a set of cards detailing the symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment for twenty-four of the most prevalent psychiatric diseases (ICD-10 PHC, chapter 5).[24]

In a clinical environment, the DSM approach has some potential drawbacks. Some people report physical symptoms. Even though the diagnostic criteria give equal weight to all nine symptoms, doctors rarely consider depression as a differential diagnosis of the patient's major complaint unless the complaint is of dysphoria or the patient is visibly and noticeably unhappy.

Patients may focus more on their physical symptoms than their emotional ones because they find the former more distressing, are less likely to admit emotional suffering, or assume the doctor will be more interested in and able to help them with the latter. Sometimes it's not clear if a patient's symptoms are the result of their depression or something else entirely.

COMORBIDITY

Anxiety disorders and substance use disorders, such as alcoholism, can co-occur with depression. Newer studies show a correlation between nicotine dependence and melancholy.

It's difficult to make a definitive diagnosis of depression and substance usage in the same patient (n=35), because each illness can mask the other. Depression and other psychiatric illnesses in general medical populations are the subject of a number of recent textbooks and review papers.[16–18]

The significant prevalence and morbidity of depression in many common medical disorders, especially those affecting the central nervous system, has been confirmed by recent research and reviews. A selection of papers analysing depression prevalence across medical conditions are summarised .

TRENDS IN TREATMENT

Scientific progress and shifts in the clinical landscape have both contributed to new directions in the treatment of depression in recent years. Fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), paroxetine (Paxil), bupropion (Wellbutrin), venlafaxine (Effexor), fluvoxamine (Lu-vox), nefazodone (Serzone), mirtazapine (Remeron), and citalopram (Celexa) are just some of the newer antidepressants to hit the market in the past decade. When compared to traditional medications like tricyclics and MAOIs, these newer medicines have quite distinct structures and pharmacological effects.

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To a greater extent than their predecessors, these medications have a reduced potential for harmful side effects, easier dosing strategies, higher rates of patient adherence, and a decreased potential for fatal overdose. Thus, they have found rapid implementation in healthcare settings, with several now ranking among the most often prescribed medications worldwide. However, similar to their older counterparts, these newer treatments also show a lag in complete therapeutic effect (several weeks or more), often lack a clear association between serum drug level and therapeutic response, and in the case of some, represent dangers of substantial drug-drug interactions.[23]

Several developments have surfaced as a direct result of alterations to health care distribution models. More and more people recognise the value of primary care providers in treating people with mental health issues.[23]

The 'gatekeeper' function has expanded to put more responsibility for depression diagnosis and treatment on primary care physicians. There is both clinical and financial pressure on them to reduce referrals to more expensive specialty care. Patients with uncomplicated depression are typically followed by their primary care physician, while patients with more complex (e.g., bipolar, psychotic, suicidal, other co-occurring psychiatric disorders such as substance use disorders) or treatment-refractory (e.g., electroconvulsive therapy, light therapy, cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy) illnesses are monitored in the specialty mental health care setting.

MANAGEMENT IN GENERAL MEDICAL SETTINGS

A study conducted at many outpatient clinics indicated that between 46% and 51% of sad individuals were identified by medical physicians, while between 78% and 87% were identified by mental health professionals.[25] Prepaid systems were associated with a decrease in depression diagnosis and treatment among medical practitioners, compared to fee-for-service models. Depression treatment rates were low to moderate under both prepaid and fee-for-service models, but the results were the same for the general medical sector.[26]

Many studies have looked at doctors and how they can or can't spot depression in their patients. High levels of physician interest in psychosocial concerns were found to be unrelated to diagnostic interviewing habits for depression in one study. However, engaging in certain interviewing behaviors—such as asking the patient open-ended questions, regularly summarising the patient's material, and responding to the patient's nonverbal and emotional cuesled to much higher rates of depression recognition.[17]

According to research by Robbins and colleagues, primary care physicians who were attuned to their patients' affective and nonverbal signs produced more accurate diagnoses of mental illness than their counterparts who were more likely to place blame on their patients. False-positive psychiatric diagnoses were determined to be infrequent in general by these authors.

Katon and Gonzales analysed all of the randomised trials of primary care mental health therapies created by consultation-liaison psychiatrists.[21]A similar conclusion was reached by them: screening treatments and feedback to the primary care physician slightly boosted recognition and treatment of depression, but the effect on patient outcomes was uncertain. While

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there may be an obvious connection between the two jobs in theory, in fact, diagnosing depression and treating it are not always done simultaneously.

Diagnostic Barriers

Medical professionals' opinions about a patient's openness to the possibility of a mental health condition represent one set of obstacles. In other cases, doctors could be hesitant to make a mental diagnosis because they don't want to violate their patients' privacy or they worry about upsetting their loved ones. Sometimes, doctors can tell when a patient isn't emotionally prepared to hear a diagnosis (by seeing how defensive they get when asked pertinent questions), so they wait to make a final assessment until the patient is ready.

Problems also arise with regards to the use of correct diagnostic criteria.Some have questioned the relevance of the DSM-IV criteria to primary care and other medical settings given their origins in the psychiatric field. This is especially true in basic care, where patients who match some but not all criteria for major depression are seen more frequently than in psychiatric settings, sparking a debate about how best to treat them. Those whose levels of depression and anxiety are borderline but not severe enough to be diagnosed with a condition also provide a challenge. Although patients in either of these categories may be experiencing symptoms and functional impairment, they may not be recognised or treated correctly because they do not fulfil all diagnostic criteria.

Treatment Barriers

Some people may refuse treatment for depression because they refuse to acknowledge the diagnosis. Some people may be reluctant to start certain treatments. Some patients are hesitant to take antidepressants because they are afraid of "becoming addicted," "needing a crutch," or taking "mind-control drugs," among other reasons; after starting on antidepressants, these patients may be more likely to incorrectly attribute their pretreatment symptoms to the medication.[18]

Some people avoid psychotherapy because they think it will be too much trouble, take too long, cost too much, or dwell too much on their troubled youth. Patients who start treatment may abandon it due to adverse drug reactions, lack of rapid recovery, or an inability to connect with their therapist, all of which might hinder their progress. Even though mental health services are readily accessible, patients may still be hesitant to seek them out. Patients must stick to the treatment plan sufficiently to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes, even if they first refuse care. In the first month of treatment, many patients drop out.[19]

Like many other medical diseases, patients with depression show considerable improvements in adherence after receiving patient education. Adherent patients may see better results than nonadherent patients, potentially on par with the effectiveness of active antidepressants against a placebo.[21]

ACTIVITIES TO REDUCE BARRIERS

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The undertreatment of depression and the need to raise public and professional awareness of the issue have been highlighted by a number of professional and advocacy organisations. For instance, a consensus panel sponsored by the National Depression and Manic-Depressive Association issued a report on undertreatment of depression, proposing five immediate steps to reduce the gap between knowledge about depression and actual treatment received. These include increasing provider knowledge and awareness, enhancing collaboration among providers for disseminating research findings, and enhancing the role of patients and families.

The AHCPR has published guidelines for the treatment of major depression in adults seeking care in primary care settings and the primary care version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, is intended to aid in the assessment and diagnosis of depression.

Treatment guidelines for major depression in adults have been created by the American Psychiatric Association with input from other medical organisations. While these guidelines are primarily aimed at psychiatrists, they may be useful to primary care physicians as well.[17,18]

McWhinney's ‘patient-centered’ and ‘problem-based’ approach to interviewing, which has been extensively tested in Britain, is an example of an approach to teaching the interviewing skills needed to increase awareness of depression.

Practitioners can learn these methods on their own or share them with medical students. There is some evidence to show that doctors who use these methods have better clinical outcomes with their patients who are suffering from depression. [19]

The American Medical Association has adopted policies that emphasize physician and public education, the need for outcomes research, and the importance of equivalent third-party coverage for psychiatric disorders. The following statements, recommended by the Council on Scientific Affairs, were adopted as AMA Policy at the AMA Interim Meeting in December 1997: [20] The AMA encourages medical schools, primary care residencies, and other training programs as appropriate to include the appropriate knowledge and skills to enable graduates to recognize,

When it comes to patient care, the AMA advocates for uniformity in education and training across all medical professionals. Additional study on the course and results of patients with depression encountered in general medical settings, as well as the development of clinical and systems initiatives to improve patient outcomes, is encouraged by the AMA. And any strategies for care management that aim to reduce service demand should be grounded on rigorous outcomes research. (4) The AMA strongly opposes any arbitrary restrictions or limitations on the provision of mental health care and completely supports equal third-party coverage for all psychiatric diseases, including depression, with that for other medical disorders. (5)The AMA, in conjunction with the National Institute of Mental Health and other relevant medical specialty and mental health advocacy groups, will work to raise public awareness of depression, lessen the stigma associated with the disorder, and expand access to effective treatment for people suffering from depression.[22-24]

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CONCLUSION

Depression is observed even more frequently in general medical settings than it is in the general community, and it is associated with significant individual and family suffering, an increased risk of suicide, functional impairment, and a substantial economic toll in health care expenses and lost productivity. There is a plethora of screening techniques available for people exhibiting symptoms, and the diagnostic criteria for this condition are well-established. Psychopharmacological and psychotherapy interventions have been shown to be highly effective.

Most cases of depression found in main care settings are less severe than those seen in specialised care, and may thus often be treated by people with the necessary knowledge in the primary care context. Comorbidity between depression and other chronic conditions can make diagnosis more challenging.

Adherence to medical treatment is typically compromised, which can significantly worsen the prognosis of both disorders, and co-occurring depression is a major contributor. Accordingly, it is crucial to identify cases of dual depression and provide appropriate treatment. Although undiagnosed cases of depression tend to be less severe and more short-lived in nature, only approximately half of all cases are noticed and diagnosed in primary care settings.[25-26] There is a strong correlation between doctors' mentality toward depression and the use of targeted interviewing techniques, both of which contribute to increased diagnosis rates. Unfortunately, even when diagnoses are made, the pharmacological and psychological interventions delivered frequently fall short of accepted standards of care. Excellent patient outcomes can be expected when clinical practise guidelines are followed. The American Medical Association (AMA) will collaborate with the National Institute of Mental Health and other relevant medical specialty and mental health advocacy groups to raise awareness about depression, lessen the negative connotations associated with the disorder, and improve patients' access to effective treatment.

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