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Expanding the Role of the Community Psychiatrist

For Hepatitis C Patients with Schizophrenia

Bethesda, MD — The prevalence of blood-borne viruses, including chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV), is consistently higher in patients with serious mental illness. Because it may remain undetected for many years, the virus may remain undetected in individuals without proper screening. Because of this, says Sarah Herold, M.D., co-author of “*Hepatitis C Virus and Schizophrenia: Expanding the Role of the Community Psychiatrist,*” Psychosomatic Medicine physicians need to re-evaluate and expand the role they play in managing patients with schizophrenia who have this illness.

The article, published in *Psychosomatics*, the Journal of the Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine, notes than HCV affects some 3.5 million people in the United States and is the leading cause of liver transplantation and death from liver disease. Recent advancements in the treatment of hepatitis C have demonstrated benefit for sustained virological response, shorter duration of treatment, and better tolerability than interferon-based treatment regimens. This treatment can cure patients with hepatitis C, preventing liver failure and development of hepatocellular carninoma.

“Patients with serious mental illness like schizophrenia were often excluded from interferon-based treatments for fear of side effects,” says Dr. Herold, Staff Psychiatrist at North Shore Medical Center, Salem, Massachusetts, and former Public and Community Psychiatry Fellow, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston.

The novel treatments for hepatitis C, which require daily adherence for several weeks, pose different challenges, particularly for those with serious mental illness. “Patients who struggle with disorganization, cognitive impairment, and poor insight can have difficulty managing this treatment,” says Dr. Herold. Data suggests, however, that improved adherence to medical regimens among this patient population has been attributed, in part, to regular and sustained contact with their mental health providers.

Unfortunately, notes Dr. Herold, “hepatologists who are less familiar with the severely mental ill population may be reluctant to offer this potentially life-saving medication, not only because of concerns about feasibility and adherence, but particularly because of the high cost of treatment.”

Because of this, the *Psychosomatics* article says, behavioral health clinicians needs to expand their role and take on increased responsibility for helping patients with severe mental illness manage medical issues in collaboration with medical providers.

“In addition to being proactive about screening, Psychosomatic Medicine physicians can help address and identify barriers to treatment adherence, advocate for their patients’ clinical needs, and link them to medical care providers to facilitate care,” adds Dr. Herold.

Psychosomatic Medicine physicians, who have expertise in managing patients with severe mental illness, have the opportunity to take a leadership role in interdisciplinary care teams, ultimately achieving the optimal level of medical treatment for those with severe mental illness.

The Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine, a professional society of more than 1,200 leading physicians, represents psychiatrists dedicated to the advancement of medical science, education, and health care for persons with co-morbid psychiatric and general medical conditions.

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