The Integration of Mental Health Competencies into a Primary Care Nurse Practitioner Curriculum

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Introduction

Primary care clinicians encounter patients with mental health problems such as substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and dementia, as well as patients and families in crisis, suicide prevention, families in crisis, mood disorders, bipolar disease, ADHD, autism, personality disorders, schizophrenia and psychosis.

Although many of these conditions need specialist care, the fact is that even if they are receiving that care they will present in primary care clinics. Primary Care Nurse Practitioner (NP) programs could add more specific content on the assessment and treatment of mental health issues in primary care settings.

Background

More than 50% of adult patients with depression were diagnosed and managed by primary care providers (Scandis and Watt (2013).

Current health care reform efforts in the United States focus on a central role for primary care in the delivery and coordination of health care services.

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that " health systems have not yet adequately responded to the burden of mental disorders. As a consequence, the gap between the need for treatment and its provision is wide all over the world.

In low- and middle-income countries, between 76% and 85% of people with mental disorders receive no treatment for their disorder. In high-income countries, between 35% and 50% of people with mental disorders are in the same situation."

It has also been estimated that less than 60 percent of adults with significant mental illness in the United States receive treatment, and two-thirds of adults with mental illnesses did not seek in-person therapy appointments due to the perceived stigma (NSDUH, 2013).

Assessment and Diagnosis of Psychiatric and Mental Health Disorders

The Assessment and Diagnosis of Psychiatric and Mental Health Disorders Course was created for our Psychiatric Mental Health NP track(PMHNP) and added to the curriculum two years ago.

Reviews mental health disorders using DSM5, reviews diagnostic/ screening tools, familial patterns, community, and socio-cultural contributions to the diagnostic process (APA, 2013, Bjorkland, 2013 & Nussbaum, 2013).

This course is now also required of all our Primary Care NP students at UMASS Amherst College of Nursing since 2016.

APRN Education and Mental Health

The goal of education Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs) or Nurse Practitioners (NPs) is to provide a basic understanding of what will be expected form them in their role in primary care to enhance their clinical decision making.

Primary care NPs routinely see depression and other common mental health issues in practice and are in a unique position to both screen and treat many common mental health disorders. The majority of prescriptions for antidepressant and anti-anxiety medication are written in primary care offices (NSDUH, 2013).

Depression is a common mental health problem which affects an estimated 350 million people worldwide (WHO, 2016). It is characterized by sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, tiredness, and poor concentration.

Depressed people have multiple physical complaints with no apparent physical cause and in severe depression this can lead to suicide. So there is a great need to address these problems and try and get patients connected to therapeutic services in primary care.

Mental health services need to be integrated into primary care given the shortage of mental health providers in many areas of the United States. An article published by *U.S News and World Report* (2014) found that the average wait time for a first time visit with a psychiatrist in the United States is 25 days (Mozes, 2014).

Curriculum Changes

The UMASS Amherst College of Nursing has taken steps to address the needs of this vulnerable population by emphasizing the importance of mental health awareness and treatment throughout its curriculum for Family Nurse Practitioners (FNPs) and Adult Gerontology Nurse Practitioners (AGPCNPs).

Our online DNP program had been incorporating some mental health assessment in clinical coursework; however it was not in the level of detail needed for expert clinical practice in mental health issues.

The assignments in the Assessment and Diagnosis of Psychiatric and Mental Illness course include:

A video recording of two interviews with a volunteer on mental status exam, present/past illness and diagnostic formation.
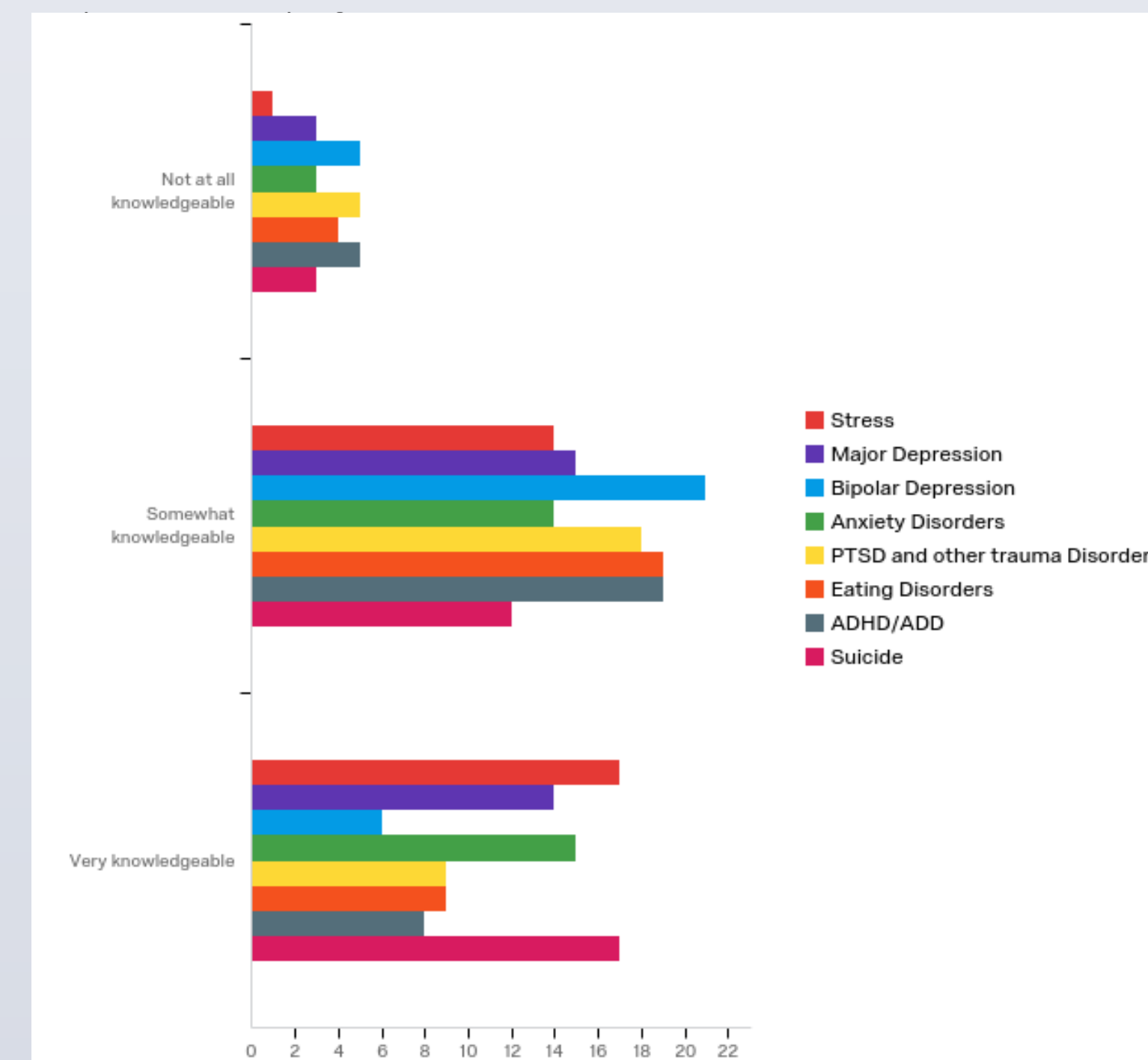
As follow up to the recording students participate in a written/ audio self- critique, and also receive instructor, and peer feedback of their interview using Voice Thread.

Two Case Study power point presentations of a selected psychiatric disorder. Students are asked to discuss prevalence, diagnostic criteria, development and course of the assigned disorder with peers

Ten online discussions using written and voice thread format and quiz

A survey of 35 current DNP students revealed the following :

Q19 - How knowledgeable do you feel about DIAGNOSING each of the following mental health conditions in adults in your

NP Students Response to New Course

"Psych has always been a little bit out of my comfort zone, but the learning environment and support from peers in this course was helpful and encouraging. Utilizing the DSM-5 was important, as in the past I had minimal experience with the tool. The area where I think I grew the most, and benefited the most was through interviewing."

"The fact that a lot of children with disruptive mood regulation were misdiagnosed with bipolar was most surprising" "I have come to terms with my own prejudices and biases about people with psychiatric disorders so that I can treat them with the dignity they deserve"

"These interviews were helpful because it is a process to learn to guide a conversation and which areas are important to cover in a very short amount of time."

Conclusion and Discussion

Skills in mental health assessment and diagnosis are necessary in order to safely treat and refer the primary care patient with mental health issues.

Many primary care nurse practitioner education programs do not include a separate course to address the diagnosis and treatment of common mental health disorders in depth, as well as how to handle patients and families in crisis Primary care clinicians must be prepared to assess, treat, and refer patients for appropriate services.

The addition of the course The Assessment and Diagnosis of Psychiatric and Mental Health Conditions course to the plan of study for primary care APRNs has been successful in helping to prepare primary care NP students for some of the common mental health conditions they will encounter in the primary care setting.

Acknowledgments

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