PEOPLE WITH CHRONIC MENTAL ILLNESS LESS SATISFIED WITH CARE THAN THOSE WITH OTHER CHRONIC CONDITIONS

Los Angeles, CA (November 12, 2003) – A new public opinion survey shows that people living with depression and mental illness are more dissatisfied than those with other chronic conditions such as diabetes or heart disease with the care that is available to them. The survey findings suggest that a different caliber of care exists for people with mental health conditions, despite the fact that illnesses such as depression are chronic in nature and their management is largely the same as for other chronic ailments.

The nationwide survey of Americans with chronic health conditions shows that those with chronic mental health conditions such as depression report more problems with access to care and treatment, report less communication among the physicians who care for them, and are less satisfied with their hospitalizations than those with other chronic ailments. In fact, these feelings exist even when there is comparable health insurance coverage.

“The message from the public is that the quality of mental health care in the United States is inferior to other care of similar conditions,” says David Blumenthal, MD, director of the Harvard Forums on Health, which commissioned the poll. “The system for delivering mental health care seems to be failing when compared to the system we have for caring for those with other chronic illnesses,” he adds.

The poll was released today at a forum on mental health held at UCLA, co-sponsored by the Harvard Interfaculty Program for Health Systems Improvement, the Harvard School of Public Health, the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute, the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine, the UCLA School of Public Health, the journal Health Affairs, and the New America Foundation.* Journalist David Gergen, a professor at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, moderated the forum.

The survey examining mental health as a chronic illness was conducted by the Washington, DC-based polling firm of Lake Snell Perry & Associates. LSPA surveyed 432 Americans age 18 and older between October 25 and November 2, 2003, who self-reported that they have “depression or any other mental or emotional health condition” or some other chronic health condition such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 6 for those
with asthma or other chronic ailments and plus or minus 9 for those with mental health conditions.

Many studies, including one released last summer by the President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, have revealed serious obstacles preventing Americans with mental illness from getting the care they need. This poll compared views on the treatment of mental illness to treatment of other chronic medical problems such as heart disease and asthma. At a time when the medical community, policymakers, and advocates are pushing for parity in mental health treatment, the survey results show that much needs to be done to improve the way people with chronic mental illness receive and access necessary care.

In fact, the findings show that people living with depression and other mental health conditions do not give high marks to the health care community for patient care.

- Forty-one percent of those with a mental health condition say the health care community does a “fair” or “poor” job compared with 17 percent of those with other chronic ailments such as diabetes or heart disease.
- Half of those with other chronic illnesses such as asthma say the medical community does an “excellent” or “very good” job in caring for patients; only a third of those with a mental health condition offer such a positive assessment.
- Among those with a mental health condition who are under medical treatment, half judge the care they are receiving as “excellent” or “very good.” Among those with other chronic conditions, over two-thirds report such a high standard of care.
- Almost a quarter of those with a mental health condition report fair or poor treatment compared with only one in 10 of those with other chronic medical conditions.

Accessing Care Remains a Problem

People with chronic mental health conditions report more problems accessing treatment than those with other chronic medical ailments. Forty-four percent of those with mental health conditions report having had to wait weeks or even months to see a doctor or another health care professional, or for a treatment they needed. In contrast, only a quarter of those with other chronic ailments report having experienced such long waits.

Access to medications is also a problem. People with mental illnesses report difficulty accessing pharmaceuticals they need — with cost usually cited as the barrier. Four in 10 people with mental health conditions report they were unable to get a medication they needed because their insurance would not cover the cost, their co-payment was too high, or they were uninsured and could not afford a particular drug. In contrast, only a quarter of those with other chronic conditions report having had this problem. More than a third of those with a mental health condition faced similar problems when attempting to see a doctor or health professional.

A Significant Number of Those with Mental Health Problems Perceive Hospital Care As Poor

People living with mental health conditions have some of the biggest complaints about the way mental health care is managed in the hospital. One in five of those with chronic mental health and other conditions report they have had a hospital stay related to their condition in the last five years. But they relay very different feelings about their experiences.
• Less than a third of those with mental health conditions say the care and treatment they received in the hospital was “excellent” or “very good”; a quarter report that it was “fair” or “poor.”
• In contrast, three quarters of those who were hospitalized for other chronic ailments such as diabetes or emphysema say the treatment they received was “excellent” or “very good.” Only one in 10 rated their care as “fair” or “poor.”

Mental health patients with recent hospital stays also are more likely than those with other chronic medical ailments to think that they were released from the hospital prematurely. Over one third of those with mental health problems said they were sent home from the hospital too soon, compared with just 7 percent of patients with diseases such as diabetes or asthma.

“The dissatisfaction with hospital care among those with mental health conditions implies that the system is not delivering appropriate care to these patients,” says Blumenthal. “Obviously, we want to avoid hospitalizations. But if a patient must go to the hospital, that patient needs to know they will receive adequate care when they are there.”

**Stigma Still Surrounds Mental Illness**

The survey also examined whether those with mental health conditions suffer from more stigma than people with other chronic ailments. For many individuals, stigma remains a significant problem. Almost six in 10 of those with mental health conditions feel people are generally supportive of their situation, but 35 percent feel people are either not supportive or very unsupportive. Similarly, a third of those with mental health conditions feel they are often or sometimes made to feel embarrassed or ashamed of their conditions. In contrast, those with other chronic medical conditions overwhelmingly feel that society is supportive (83 percent), and almost none feel embarrassed or ashamed of their condition.

Copies of a report on the findings of the poll, “Mental Health as a Chronic Illness,” can be obtained by calling Eliza Brinkmeyer at Burness Communications at 301/652-1558, ext. 208, or by emailing her at ebrinkmeyer@burnesscommunications.com. A copy of the poll also can be obtained by visiting The Harvard Forums on Health website at www.phsi.harvard.edu. A webcast of the forum will be online as of November 17, 2003.

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