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Web site gives individuals heads up on their mental health

January 09, 2007 | *Alison Delory*

Company employees sign on to answer questions and receive treatment

Six years ago a patient was referred to psychiatrist Dr. Sam Ozersky by his employer because he was coming to work atypically late, looked slovenly and seemed despondent in meetings.

The man, an accountant making \$300,000 annually, had been previously diagnosed with depression and prescribed Prozac. Dr. Ozersky, a staff psychiatrist with the University Health Network in Toronto, evaluated the man, determined he wasn't receiving the proper dosage and doubled his Prozac. Within four weeks the patient began feeling better and was more productive at work.

It got Dr. Ozersky thinking. Could he do something to help people with mental health problems get properly diagnosed and treated more quickly?

"A lot of people are going through unnecessary pain and threatening the stability of their jobs and families" said Dr. Ozersky, claiming one in five individuals will suffer a significant mental health problem in their lives, but many don't seek or receive help in managing such an illness. Dr. Ozersky said he is also concerned that the burden of identifying and caring for these patients often falls on family physicians.

Convinced early intervention is the key to helping mental health patients, he came up with the idea of a Web site that employers could offer their workers to help them identify if they have or are at high risk of developing common mental disorders including mood and anxiety disorders or addiction. He believed he could sell it as a way to improve productivity and competitiveness while reducing overall health-care costs.

He enlisted the help of physician leaders and put together a clinical advisory board that includes Dr. Richard Swinson, Chief of Psychiatry at St Joseph's Health Care in Hamilton, Dr. Sid Kennedy, Psychiatrist-in-Chief at the University Health Network in Toronto, Dr. William Gnam, a Psychiatrist with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, and Dr. Elliot Halparin, a Family Physician and former president of the Ontario Medical Association.

All were feeling frustrated by the number of improper mental health diagnoses they were seeing, and by the number of patients who, having been diagnosed had stopped their treatment once they began feeling better and had again become ill.

"They weren't being handled in an optimal manner," said Dr. Ozersky. Together, they incorporated a company called Mensante, developed FeelingBetterNow and after piloting the site with hundreds of their own patients, launched it earlier this year. So far Dofasco Inc., Toronto Dominion Bank and British Columbia's Healthcare Benefit Trust have signed up.

Employees are given a code that gives them access to the Web site at work or at home. They answer questions and receive a diagnostic assessment and treatment plan they can then take to their family doctor to expedite care. People use an alias on the site so their identity is protected.

"I wanted to take some of the heavy lifting out of the hands of the doctor", said Dr. Ozersky, "to create a situation whereby it takes the family doctor much less time to get better outcomes and thereby increases the capacity of each family doctor to manage more mental health patients".

The College of Family Physicians of Canada has recently reviewed and approved FeelingBetterNow as a practice management tool.

Family physicians who want to be part of a study can contact the Mensante Corp. and they will be given a code they can distribute to patients who don't have access to FeelingBetterNow through their company or insurer. To find out more, e-mail info@mensante.com.

Dr. Ozersky will be lobbying the health ministries and hopes eventually the health-care system will fund the site so all Canadians will have free access.