



Media Release

Nov. 9, 2005

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HCHD Program Addresses Community's Behavioral Health Needs

Integrative approach to patient care fosters early disease intervention, treatment

The Harris County Hospital District (HCHD) is launching a new program to integrate behavioral health services into community-based primary care centers. The program is the result of a collaborative effort between HCHD, Baylor College of Medicine, the University of Texas-Houston Medical School, the Asian American Family Center, Denver Harbor Center, El Centro de Corazon, the Federal Detention Center, Good Neighbor Healthcare Center and the Council on Alcohol and Drugs Houston.

"This is a significant achievement for behavioral health services in our community," said Dr. Britta Ostermeyer, director of HCHD's Community Behavioral Health Program and Ben Taub General Hospital's Psychiatric Outpatient Clinic. "The earlier we detect and address behavioral health issues, the less likely those patients will end up in hospital emergency rooms where the cost of providing care is much higher."

The HCHD Community Behavioral Health Program will foster early intervention and treatment among patients by placing psychiatrists and behavioral health specialists side-by-side with primary care physicians (PCP) to help detect and treat problems before they worsen.

Psychiatrists will work with primary care physicians to help them better identify behavioral health problems, like depression and anxiety disorders, and jointly initiate treatments for patients. Additionally, psychiatrists will be available to provide complete evaluations for patients at the centers.

The program will improve patients' overall health, according to Ostermeyer, who says those with behavioral health problems are less likely to comply with other medical treatment plans, including those for diabetes and hypertension.

"When you treat a person's depression they are better able to follow doctor's orders and take care of their other medical problems," she says.

The program provides for behavioral health specialists to conduct individual and group therapy at the centers. Behavioral health specialists will also educate at-risk patients, and those identified as having a problem, on the implications of substance use and abuse. Social workers will provide counseling and assist patients in accessing health and human resources within the community.

Roughly one of every four patients seen in Ben Taub Hospital's Emergency Center is diagnosed with a behavioral health problem, according to Dr. John Burruss, chief of

psychiatry at Ben Taub Hospital. The most common, he says, are alcoholism, depression and anxiety disorders.

The Harris County Hospital District and its collaborative partners will host the HCHD Behavioral Health Program kickoff on Nov. 9 at Lyndon B. Johnson General Hospital. A presentation titled Integrating Behavioral Health into Primary Care: Moving Forward with a New Model in the Harris County Hospital District will be led by Ostermeyer and Burruss, and Drs. Jose Bayona and Thomas Gavagan, assistant chiefs of staff for HCHD's Community Health Program.

The Harris County Hospital District is the public healthcare system for the nation's third most populous county. It encompasses Ben Taub and Lyndon B. Johnson general hospitals; Quentin Mease Community Hospital; 12 community health centers, a dental center, seven school-based clinics, 13 homeless shelter clinics and four mobile health units.

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