

Coordinating Care with Other Clinicians: All You Have to do is Ask

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Most experts agree that improvements in the quality of behavioral health care are needed. One way individual practitioners can make a contribution to quality is to ensure that there are good exchanges of clinical information with colleagues. At a minimum, practitioners should be informed about which treatment(s) are being performed, and which medications are being prescribed (if any), especially for patients with complex clinical histories.

Many practitioners, however, are reluctant to communicate with other clinicians because they assume that patients do not want their 'doctor' to talk about them to anyone else.

But is this true? To find out, we sent a short internet questionnaire to a sample of MHN practitioners earlier this year. We received responses from 74 psychiatrists (11% of the psychiatrist sample) and 478 non-psychiatrists (27% of the non-psychiatrist sample).

We asked the following question:

When you request permission from your patients about contacting another practitioner to coordinate care, how often do they agree to give it?

We obtained the following results:

Over 80% of non-psychiatrists responded that patients 'usually' or 'always' give them permission to contact another practitioner; for psychiatrists it was even higher—more than 90%.

These results suggest that most patients will agree to clinical partnering if practitioners ask them to. To ensure your patients' safety and that you are not working at cross-

purposes with other clinicians who are treating them, we recommend that you ask your patients who the other clinicians are, and then find out what those clinicians are doing. This can be accomplished with a brief telephone call. For example,

“I’m John Doe, a psychiatrist, and I’ve met with your patient Mr. Jones. I have diagnosed Major Depression and I’ve prescribed Cymbalta 30mg daily. Please call me if you have any questions, or any information that you wish to convey about your work with Mr. Jones.”

“I’m Jane Doe, a psychologist, and I’ve met with your patient Ms. Jones. I believe she is struggling with Social Phobia. We have begun exposure therapy to address this. Please call me if you have any questions, or any information that you wish to convey about your work with Ms. Jones (such as whether you have prescribed anything for her).”

Alternatively, you may download the MHN Behavioral Health Coordination Form (BHCF) from the MHN provider website [www.mhn.com], complete it, and fax it to the other clinicians. Whether you make a brief call or fax the BHCF, remember to write a quick note in the chart to complete the process.

Coordinating care involves three steps: asking for consent, reaching out to the other clinician, and documenting that you did so. None of these steps has to involve a lot of time. And as our survey shows, most patients are quite willing to give permission—all you have to do is ask.