

VA Service Line System Improves Mental Health Care

VISN 1 MIRECC researchers have found improvement in VA mental health care quality indicators following the reorganization around service lines in 1996. Prior to this time, mental health care services were organized according to professional disciplines such as psychiatry, psychology, social work and nursing. The chiefs of psychiatry were nominally responsible for mental health care but had no authority over staff from other disciplines. The 1996 changes were designed to improve cross-professional coordination by appointing service line managers to direct teams based on the services to be delivered such as psychiatric outpatient care, psychosocial rehabilitation or substance abuse services. To detect the impact of this change on treatment delivery, MIRECC researchers examined service quality indicators before and after 1996 in 139 VA medical centers. They found significant improvements in 6 of 10 measures including continuity of care, reduced re-admission rates following hospital discharge and increased proportion of outpatient care. Most of these improvements were seen in the first year following re-organization and did not continue to improve in the second and third years after the change. The strongest and most long lasting indicators showed a three year trend for improvement in continuity of care. These positive changes suggest that the service line system improves communication and cooperation between different professional groups around common goals. This study is the first to detect evidence of improved care following this major change in VA service delivery strategies. The MIRECC health service research team included Greg Greenberg, Robert Rosenheck and Martin Charns.