Educational support materials for ABIM’s Care for the Underserved Module

Question 17

Despite the proven efficacy of pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy for depression, several studies have found that blacks and other ethnic minorities with depressive disorders receive lower quality of care. Disparities in depression care are related to health system factors (e.g., availability of mental health professionals), physician factors (e.g., knowledge and communication skills), and patient factors (e.g., cultural beliefs and attitudes). Important barriers to mental health care for African-American and Latino patients identified in previous research include patients’ perceptions of stigma, beliefs that life experiences are the cause of depression, that problems should not be discussed outside one’s family, mistrust of health care professionals, and concerns about the effects of psychotropic medication. It is unclear whether use of spirituality, other active coping strategies, informal sources of support like family and friends, and help-seeking from clergy actually also serve as barriers to formal health care for ethnic minority patients. Beliefs about religious or supernatural causes of mental illness may lead to lower mental health service use, and patient preferences are likely to play an important role.

Compared with white patients, minority patients express stronger preferences for psychotherapy and spiritual approaches and more negative attitudes toward antidepressant medication. However, perceived mental illness stigma is usually similar for all races and ethnicities and, in some cases, is higher among whites than among minorities. Though many health beliefs and preferences differ across racial and ethnic groups, physicians must always confirm what is true or relevant for an individual patient. An understanding of broad cultural concepts and skills and use of a patient-centered approach that takes into account the individual patient’s explanatory model, illness agenda and behaviors, social context, and beliefs and skills may be used to avoid stereotyping behavior.

For further information, see the following:


This educational support material was created by the Society of General Internal Medicine’s Disparities Task Force. For more information, visit www.sgim.org/go/disparities
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