

Matchmaking between physical and mental health providers

James Bennett and Eleanor Littman

Pediatricians and family practice clinicians are in the front lines of identifying behavioral health problems such as depression, substance abuse, anxiety, eating disorders and learning disabilities. Seeing patients with these issues, pediatrician James Bennett realized that there was room for improvement in connecting local physicians and mental health experts.

Bennett serves as pediatric medical director at Dominican Hospital and sees patients at Capitola Pediatrics. He also chairs the Pediatric Vision Group -- a group of pediatricians affiliated with the Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County. HIP is a countywide collaborative of health, foundation and government leaders dedicated to increasing access to care and building a stronger health care delivery system in Santa Cruz County.

Eleanor Littman, HIP's executive director, recently talked with Bennett about his efforts to connect pediatricians and mental health specialists.

EL: What motivated you to connect these two groups?

JB: Pediatricians and family practice physicians are often the first points of contact when a child faces a stressful life situation. These challenges come in many forms -- school problems, behavioral issues, developmental delays, autism, anxiety, depression, family dysfunction, eating disorders and substance abuse. As physicians, we need to work closely with our mental health specialists to address these families' needs. Unfortunately, our health care paradigm makes this challenging by separating physical and mental health. When physicians and mental health specialists don't communicate effectively, patients suffer.

I recently saw several adolescent patients with eating disorders. To effectively manage their care, I needed to be working with a variety of other specialists -- a nutritionist, therapist and psychiatrist. Finding and forming that team took a lot of time and research. In most instances, we have the talent locally to address the mental health challenges that our patients face, but we as a community need greater dialogue between physicians and mental health providers.

EL: How did you identify the experts you wanted to reach out to?

JB: I worked with Kathy Pabich, a nursing student with a public health interest, to identify all mental health providers in the county who work with children or adolescents. We scoured phone books, websites, personal contacts and insurance directories. To our surprise, we identified hundreds of mental health workers in the county working with children and adolescents. We invited all of them, along with local pediatricians and family practice physicians, to a mixer that drew nearly 100 people. It was amazing to have nearly 100 people working in our small county with the exact same patient population -- many of whom had never met before! The energy at the event was fantastic; we all realized how important it was in building bridges between our medical and mental health communities.

EL: What's next?

JB: Our objective is to break down walls between the medical and mental health communities. The mixer was a great first step, but what the county needs now is a system to support the development of more lasting relationships between physicians and mental health specialists. To address this need, we are creating a

pediatric mental health directory that would catalogue all of the county's pediatric mental health providers and their areas of interest and specialties. It will be available to the medical community as a clinical resource.

Primary care physicians, when faced with a patient or family with a specific mental health need, could quickly refer to the directory and locate appropriate local resources and providers. It will be an immensely valuable tool in an immediate clinical situation as well as fostering the long-term relationships between physicians and therapists in the community.

James Bennett is the pediatric medical director at Dominican Hospital. Eleanor Littman is the executive director of the Health Improvement Partnership.