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Arthritis care in Ontario enhanced by extended-role practitioners

ACR 2011, Nov. 11 - A prospective two-year evaluation of a program to train physiotherapists and occupational therapists to offer extended services in arthritis care has shown the program is effective across a range of measures.

The Advanced Clinician Practitioner in Arthritis Care (ACPAC) program is a collaborative effort organized by St. Michael's Hospital and the Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, to support innovative models of arthritis care by allowing graduates to play a bigger role in the assessment, diagnosis and independent management of arthritis-related disorders.

Results of a survey of the first 30 graduates of the intensive one-year program practising at centres across Ontario were presented by researchers involved with the program.

Rationale

The evaluation was undertaken to assess whether the ACPAC program is helping to deliver integrated and timely health care.

Study design

The study involved a number of evaluations with program graduates and the patients they have cared for.

- Participating program graduates completed electronic questionnaires at the end of each fiscal quarter in 2009 and 2010.
- Focus groups were conducted with 20 of the program practitioners, and interviews were conducted with 18 of their colleagues and administrators.
- Some 325 patients seen by the program-trained therapists were polled about their satisfaction with services.

Findings

The study found virtually all ACPAC graduates were working in an extended practice role and referred patients to a wide variety of services, ranging from physician care to educational resources. Most were seeing patients with osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis in a followup capacity.

More than half the program graduates surveyed reported acting under medical directives. They ordered laboratory tests and X-rays and recommended medication changes and joint injections - but rarely performed these procedures themselves.

Barriers to performing their extended roles included institution-specific lack of medical directives remuneration issues and struggling to identify their appropriate role.

Patients were enthusiastic about the role of the therapists, with high overall satisfaction. The majority (60%) felt the therapists were providing care that was superior to that being provided by other health care providers.

Conclusions

The researchers concluded that ACPAC graduates are effective participants of interprofessional, patient-centred collaboration in arthritis care and are contributing to organizational change to benefit patients with arthritis.

The studies also concluded this model "may be an effective strategy to address the progressive decline in the number of arthritis care specialists."