



Study: Communication training improves patient-centered provider behavior and screening for soldiers' mental health concerns

Introduction by Darlene Parker, Vanderbilt Center for Experiential Learning and Assessment

The use of standardized patients (SPs) in non-traditional settings continues to expand. In the fall of 2012, the Center of Experiential Learning and Assessment at Vanderbilt University Medical Center contributed to a research project supported by the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs and the US Army Medical Research and Materiel Command by training standardized patients to be standardized soldiers. The project's objective was to test the feasibility and efficacy of a training intervention by using SPs to portray soldiers who had returned to the United States following deployments to combat zones. SPs were interviewed by health practitioners of the Post-Deployment Health Re-Assessment (PDHRA) as training for the providers.

Army Health practitioners voluntarily participated in a training workshop aimed at increasing the effectiveness of getting US soldiers recently returned from Afghanistan or Iraq to accept behavioral health referrals to address mental health concerns by increasing their patient-centered communication strategies when interviewing soldiers using the PDHRA. The workshop training was done on site at four army bases and included 23 participants. SPs were interviewed by using teleconferencing and/or Face Time from CELA. The SPs were used at the end of the training for providers to practice implementation of the interviewing techniques learned in the workshop. Feedback was provided to practitioners by the trainers.

Four cases were developed to include the common challenges practitioners face when interviewing soldiers. Seven SPs were trained to portray soldiers. Training included extensive research of field experiences, personal problems, and barriers to care associated with war deployment. Each case specifically included predetermined criteria each soldier followed in order to disclose experiences or accept a referral for help from a behavior health practitioner.

This project illustrates an innovative use of peer-learning strategies where SP encounters with individual providers were conducted in a group setting with the

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opportunity for feedback and additional follow-up communication from other group members. The findings were published in *Patient Education and Counseling*,

Link (Science Direct):

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0738399116300398>

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