



Preventive Recognition of Early Psychosis: Revolutionizes the Treatment and Care of Devastating Mental Illness

Mammography. Prostate screenings. Cholesterol tests. Early-detections medical tests have become both standard and invaluable in efforts to identify – and then prevent – life-threatening illnesses such as cancer, heart attack, and stroke. These early detection and preventive treatment efforts have revolutionized physical healthcare in our lifetimes, resulting in dramatically improved longevity and quality of life.

In contrast, efforts to develop preventive identification and treatment for serious mental illnesses have lagged behind this revolution in physical healthcare. The great majority of existing mental health services – including services for serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia – offer interventions only after a mental illness has become an overwhelming condition.

Today, Family Service Agency of San Francisco (FSA), the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) and the Mental Health Association of San Francisco (MHA-SF) are poised on the cusp of a radical transformation in mental healthcare: early detection, and preventive treatment, for one of the most serious and devastating mental illnesses – psychosis.

Psychosis – defined as the inability to distinguish the real from the imaginary – is a hallmark of schizophrenia. Typically, psychotic schizophrenia is too often a traumatic, under-diagnosed, and under-treated disorder. Studies show that schizophrenia usually goes undiagnosed for years after symptoms first emerge; further, they show that

even after diagnosis, patients usually go untreated or under-treated for an average of 1-2 years more.

During this long delay in treatment, the costs of untreated schizophrenia are enormous: to the individual, the family, and the larger community. Extreme emotional and psychological distress; frequent hospitalizations; incarceration; substance abuse; fractured family lives; failures on the job or in school; paranoid beliefs and socially intolerable behaviors; homelessness: these are the all-too-frequent consequences of untreated psychosis. Further, neurological research confirms that, left untreated, psychosis actually causes physical damage to the brain, making later treatment more limited and difficult.

But today, there is room for revolutionary hope. Studies confirm that psychosis “brews” for several years before it develops into a full psychotic break. During this time, various symptoms are evident but are unspecific and generally go unrecognized. This period has come to be known as the “prodromal” phase. (Related to the word “syndrome,” “prodrome” is defined as early symptoms indicating the eventual development of a disease.)

Recent clinical trials conducted around the world have demonstrated that effective treatment (including education, psychodynamic therapy, and medication) during the prodromal period can substantially improve outcomes for people experiencing psychosis: delaying the onset of psychosis, lessening its severity, and

reducing its negative psychosocial consequences.

Across the United States and Canada, 14 universities and community-based organizations are developing early-identification projects in response to the growing recognition of the benefits of a proactive, preventive approach to treating at-risk individuals. Today, FSA has joined this effort, forming a partnership with UCSF and the Mental Health Association of San Francisco to develop PREP: the Preventive Recognition of Early Psychosis program, serving at-risk young people of San Francisco, supporting their families, and advancing the national standard of care for people with psychosis.

Focusing on teenagers and young adults, PREP will provide screenings, diagnosis, therapy, medication management, case management, psycho-education about managing the condition, and family support. PREP will accept clients referred through every avenue: family members, primary care physicians, community clinics, school healthcare providers, and individuals themselves.

As part of the PREP approach, FSA’s Felton Institute for Excellence in Clinical Training will train clinicians in the psychodynamic methods that have been scientifically proven to be the most effective for this population. The Mental Health Association of San Francisco will work with FSA’s Institutional Advancement department to create outreach and educational materials to

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help attract potential clients, to educate the public about the importance and benefit of mental healthcare, and to reduce the stigma that still lingers around issues of mental illness.

Once clients are referred to PREP, FSA clinicians will provide initial screenings, using early-identification tools specially developed by the UCSF researchers. If clients do not meet the criteria for early psychosis, FSA will connect them with resources most appropriate to address their needs. For those who are identified as at-risk for developing psychosis, the collaborative PREP team will begin by making a thorough assessment, conducted by specialists at UCSF, who will then work with the treatment team to outline an individualized plan of care. This plan will include comprehensive education about psychosis and its treatment for both the client and family,

substance-abuse treatment if needed, case management, one-on-one and group counseling for both client and family, medication management, and any other supports that are appropriate for the client.

“PREP reflects FSA’s commitment to advancing the field of mental health treatment by marshalling leading resources and employing evidence-based treatment approaches,” says Bob Bennett, FSA’s Chief Executive Officer.

“At FSA, we base our work on two fundamental premises: that effective mental health treatment is a right, not a privilege, and that recovery is an achievable goal for every individual living with serious mental illness. This partnership with UCSF and MHA-SF offers an important opportunity to revolutionize mental health care by creating the same early-identification and treatment methods we now take for granted in the battle against illnesses like heart disease and cancer.”