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Covid19: Interim Considerations for State Psychiatric Hospitals
Introduction

Individuals with serious mental illness, particularly those who are older or who have chronic medical conditions, are at risk for illness with Covid-19. It is important that mental health facilities be prepared for Covid-19 to keep both individuals in treatment as well as staff safe.

In addition to consideration of infection control guidelines with the goal of minimizing spread, described below, it is also important to be aware of the psychological impact of quarantine and major disruptions to everyday life. Healthcare workers need to support the mental health of their patients, and they also need attend to their own needs and those of their families. [1] It is important to provide access to accurate information sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).[2]   The American Psychiatric Association has resources on the mental health impacts of Covid-19.[3] Given the uncertainty and rapid change associated with the virus, anxiety and distress should be anticipated.[4]

State psychiatric hospitals

State psychiatric hospitals typically have developed All Hazards Plans that require the establishment of protocols and relationships with other local government and healthcare entities. Each accredited facility has existing infection control plans that are designed to address scenarios such as for MRSA, HIV, Hepatitis and others. In contrast to general healthcare settings, psychiatric facilities may have unique challenges in prevention and infection control for several reasons: 1) Individuals with serious mental illnesses may have varying degrees of capacity to follow appropriate infection control procedures; 2) the nature of the therapeutic milieu may make minimal contact rules more challenging.

The CDC recommends the following goals for all healthcare facilities:[5]

1) Reduce morbidity and mortality
2) Minimize disease transmission
3) Protect healthcare personnel
4) Preserve healthcare system functioning

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[1] Sustaining the Well-Being of Healthcare Personnel during Coronavirus and other Infectious Disease Outbreaks https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Sustaining_Well_Being_Healthcare_Personnel_during.pdf.pdf Accessed March 17, 2020

[2] Centers for Disease Control, Coronavirus https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2Findex.html Accessed March 17, 2020

[3] Covid-19 Mental Health Impacts Resources for Psychiatrist https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/apa-blogs/apa-blog/2020/03/covid-19-mental-health-impacts-resources-for-psychiatrists Accessed March 17, 2020

[4] Caring for patient mental well-being during coronavirus https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Caring_for_Patients_Mental_WellBeing_during_Coronavirus.pdf.pdf Accessed March 17, 2020

[5] Guidance for Healthcare Facilities https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/healthcare-facilities/guidance-hcf.html. Accessed March 17, 2020

There are a number of steps that healthcare facilities can take now to be prepared should an individual become infected with Covid-19.[6] Some examples of actions from the CDC include:

1) Ensure that staff are aware of sick leave policies, and staff should be encouraged to stay home if they are not feeling well.
2) Administrative and clinical staff should review infection control policies and procedures as determined by your institutional and state regulations.   Psychiatric hospitals should follow all infection control guidelines as stipulated by the CDC. For general infection control guidelines, see https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/infection-control/index.html. [7]
3) The CDC also makes some specific recommendations for long term care facilities, which might be a consideration[8]:
    a. Limit visitors to the facility
    b. Post visual alerts (signs, posters) at entrances and in strategic places providing instruction on hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene, and cough etiquette

4) Ensure supplies are available (tissues, waste receptacles, alcohol-based hand sanitizer)
5) Take steps to prevent known or suspected COVID-19 patients from exposing other patients
6) Limit the movement of COVID-19 patients (e.g., have them remain in their room)
7) Identify dedicated staff to care for COVID-19 patients.
8) Observe newly arriving patients/residents for development of respiratory symptoms.

Other considerations might include:

1) Management of psychosocial group treatment sessions
2) Ability to buddy team with paraprofessional staff if regular staff ratios are limited due to staff illness
3) Increased cleaning of all surfaces.

Conclusion

 During this rapidly changing situation, mental health providers should refer to the CDC website for the most updated information.   Individuals with serious mental illness are at particular risk related to co-occurring medical conditions as well as challenges with accessing healthcare. Attention to proper prevention and infection control procedures as well as attention to the psychological impacts of the virus are important.

Other Related documents:

Considerations for Outpatient Clinical Services

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[6] Ibid
[7] Infection control guidelines https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/infection-control/index.html. Accessed March 17, 2020

[8] Guidance for Healthcare Facilities https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/healthcare-facilities/guidance-hcf.html Accessed March 17, 2020