VITAL SIGNS

Massachusetts Medical Society

Every physician matters, each patient counts.

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Moving Forward on Mental Health Parity

Prior Authorization Requirements Removed; Some Physicians Feel More Reforms Needed

BY ERICA NOONAN

The state's health care payment reform law, passed in August, contained important provisions that will require payers across Massachusetts to demonstrate compliance with federal mental health parity laws.

The new provisions are determined to reduce many long-standing barriers to timely and consistent mental health care, such as quantitative limits on care, and requires insurers to treat behavioral health patients no differently from medical-surgical patients.

Mass Health will no longer require prior authorization permission before treating a patient for behavioral health issues. Private insurers will be required to submit annual reports to the Mass. Attorney General's office certifying compliance. The law also requires insurers to increase transparency in how mental health reimbursement decisions are made and establishes a special task force to make recommendations on how to integrate behavioral health services in new payment and delivery systems.

Mental health patients frequently wait in the emergency department for hours — sometimes days — for treatment authorizations and admissions, while hospitals engage in a lengthy permission-seeking process to treat and get reimbursed for the care, said Mark Pearlmutter, M.D., F.A.C.E.P, chair and vice president of emergency services at Steward Health.

A medical-surgical emergency room patient is generally admitted to a facility within 4 hours. For a mental health patient the average is closer to 18 hours, he said. A mental health patient who must be transferred will typically wait close to 24 hours, said Dr. Pearlmutter.

Outpatient psychiatric care is similarly hard to obtain in a timely manner. "If one of my peers refers out, say for a GI issue, he can expect a specialist

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New PHS Director Plans to Bring Prevention Focus

Steven Adelman, M.D., Takes Top Post; Luis Sanchez, M.D., Retires

BY VICKI RITTERBAND

As a child, Steven Adelman, M.D., was mystified by his mother's years-long battle to quit smoking. "How could this intelligent, health-conscious woman struggle with this chronic addiction? This captured my interest in a deeply emotional way," Dr. Adelman recalled.

Dr. Adelman, 58, went on to become a psychiatrist and an expert in addiction at a time when scientists were just beginning to understand the interplay between biology and addiction and before the term "addiction medicine" had even been coined.

Three decades later, the former director of Behavioral Health and Addiction Medicine at Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates is set to become the new director of Physician Health Services (PHS), one of the most influential programs of its type in the country. PHS, a nonprofit corporation founded by the Massachusetts Medical Society, provides confidential consultation and support to physicians, residents, and medical students facing behavioral or physical health concerns.

"I thought if Dr. [Luis] Sanchez ever retired, this is a job I'd be very interested in," said Dr. Adelman, who worked closely with PHS while at Harvard Vanguard. "This job fits with everything I've been doing for the past 20–30 years."

Dr. Adelman, who officially assumes his new duties March 18, believes that the services provided by the 20-year-old nonprofit are needed more than ever now, as medicine has become an increasingly high-stress profession.

"I would put it up there with the military, law enforcement, and air traffic control," he said. "The pace is grueling and a lot [more] is being dictated down to doctors as ever before. The result is an unprecedented number of doctors experiencing burnout."

Photo by Doug Bradshaw

Steven Adelman, M.D., incoming PHS director (left) and Luis Sanchez, M.D., (right).

An Emphasis on Prevention

Dr. Adelman said he would like to see PHS intensify its work in the area of prevention. "PHS will always focus on providing assistance to struggling physicians, but I'd like to see us place an even greater emphasis on physician health and wellness, self-care, work-life balance, resilience, and stress management," he said. "The presumption is that physicians who take better care of themselves and support one another throughout their careers will manage the vicissitudes of medical practice more effectively."

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