

Building the Pediatric Primary Care Mental Health Workforce: the Pediatric Mental Health Specialist (PMHS)

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Background: It has been nearly two decades since the Surgeon General called upon pediatric primary care providers to expand their scope of practice to attend to the mental health needs of children and adolescents.(1) Since then, many providers have obtained increased training in mental health care. However wide variability continues to exist and inadequate access to mental health care for children remains a problem.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to provide the basis for a new specialty certification examination for advanced practice nurses in pediatric primary mental health care: PMHS. The study sought to validate that APRNs in pediatric primary care had gained, by virtue of experience, interest and ongoing training, the expertise to attend and respond to many of the mental health needs of children and adolescents in primary care.

Methodology: In 2009, the Pediatric Nursing Certification Board (PNCB) launched a national survey and role delineation study (practice analysis) to validate the important and relevance to practice of broad content areas and tasks related to the delivery of pediatric mental health care within primary care (2). (A second national survey is currently in process which will examine whether any changes have occurred in this role in the past six years.)

Results: Three hundred providers widely dispersed across the country have now described the range, frequency, and scope of activities that have become the basis for the Pediatric Primary Care Mental Health Specialist role. The study validated that many APRNs (Advance Practice Registered Nurses) caring for children in primary care have added competencies worthy of added specialty recognition and certification. The research defined the scope of PMHS exam content and is used to develop the 150 questions on this exam which has been available to eligible APRNs since fall, 2011.

Exemplars: Three distinct exemplars are shared that describe the PMHS in practice.

Conclusion: The PMHS certification provides formal recognition of a post advanced practice nursing certification specialty in child and adolescent mental and behavioral health and is consistent with the APRN Consensus Model. This new role strongly supports the early involvement of the primary health care provider in the promotion of mental health as well as early intervention within the pediatric health care home. The PMHS certification of over 350 advanced practice nurses in this specialty marks a significant step in improving critical access to mental health for children in this country. (3).

References:

1. US Department of Health and Human Services. Mental Health: a report of the surgeon general. 1999. <http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/ps/access/NNBBHS.pdf>. Retrieved November 11, 2016.
2. Hawkins-Walsh, E. and Van Cleve, D. (2013). The Pediatric Mental Health Specialist: Role Delineation. Journal for Nurse Practitioners, 9 (3), 142-148.
3. Pediatric Nursing Certification Board. Pediatric Mental Health Specialist Certification Exam. <http://www.pncb.org/ptistore/control/exam/mh/pmhs.role>. Retrieved November 11, 2016.