Executive Summary

To achieve higher quality care, better patient outcomes and lower costs, the healthcare industry is moving rapidly toward the adoption of more collaborative models of patient care. This is especially true as value-based care, where reimbursement is based on quality outcomes rather than services, plays a critical role in the process. Collaborative ventures already being created include Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs), Patient-Centered Medical Homes (PCMHs) and Health Information Exchanges (HIEs). In each of these models, reimbursement is tied to how well participating healthcare organizations address the aforementioned healthcare goals.

Each of these approaches also requires a new mindset on the part of caregivers. Providers from across the entire continuum of care must begin to take a more holistic view of each patient, sharing information and insights with each other at every stage in the patient care process.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to collaborative care is what has been termed “the multi-condition patient.” There are about 75 million people in the U.S. who have multiple, concurrent chronic conditions. Behavioral/medical co-morbidity, the affect all other diseases have on an individual patient’s primary disease, also is extremely high in this country. Evidence has shown that mental health disorders, particularly depression, are strongly associated with the risk, occurrence, management, progression and outcome of serious chronic diseases and health conditions, including diabetes, hypertension, stroke, heart disease and cancer.

Because behavioral and medical conditions are risk factors for each other, it’s imperative for providers in both areas to quickly share information and work together.

Purpose of this White Paper

This white paper will examine:

- Why behavioral health and medical health traditionally have been disengaged from one another;
- Why behavioral health leads the way in collaborative care efforts;
- The benefits of collaborative care processes;
- The role of EHR technology in enabling collaborative care;
- How to foster full collaboration among providers and vendors for the benefit of patient care.

2 “Mental Health,” by HealthyPeople.gov, August 20, 2014.
collaboratively. Yet historically this has not been easy. Medical and behavioral providers typically have shared information by mail or fax, not electronically. Moreover, clinical data often is more numerical in nature, while behavioral data often is more qualitative.

Information technology is the key to integrating behavioral and medical providers into a seamless network capable of delivering genuinely collaborative care. Technology vendors play an essential role in helping to bridge the gap and foster greater interdisciplinary teamwork. This white paper will examine:

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« Why behavioral health leads the way in collaborative care efforts;
« The benefits of collaborative care processes;
« The role of EHR technology in enabling collaborative care;
« How to foster full collaboration among providers and vendors for the benefit of patient care.

Reasons for the Disconnect

Up until now, the current pathology-driven medical healthcare system has maintained only limited communication with behavioral health providers. That has been due in part to cultural stigmas attached to behavioral health on the part of patients, who in the past may have wished to keep that information separate from their primary care and other medical records.

Veterans returning from World War II, however, began a slow transformation in that attitude. In many respects, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) became an early collaborative care organization when it began offering a single source of both medical and behavioral care for returning service men and women. Consequently, VA providers have long been in the forefront of using technology to cultivate this holistic approach to patient care.

For many in today’s healthcare system, there is less taboo associated with behavioral health. Furthermore, because millions of patients have been diagnosed with both medical and behavioral conditions, there is increasing urgency to provide more effective clinical data integration. As it turns out, behavioral health by its very nature can help lead the way.

Successfully Integrating Two Worlds

For collaborative care to be successful, it’s important to understand the clear-cut differences between the provision of behavioral healthcare and medical healthcare. The former is intrinsically collaborative, while the latter has long been compartmentalized.
Most medical specialties currently are pathology-driven and “siloed,” with no information-sharing between two areas. Historically, this has made it extremely difficult to treat co-morbid conditions with optimum efficiency and effectiveness.

For example, a primary care physician monitoring a patient’s diabetes might not be aware that the person is also a recovering alcoholic being treated for depression. If the patient starts drinking again, the physician might note that blood sugar levels have increased—but without fully understanding the root cause. This lack of information might make it difficult for the physician to effectively bring the patient’s diabetes under control, and might even lead him to prescribe medications that make the patient’s depression worse.

The healthcare industry has come to realize that not effectively “connecting the dots” can cause redundant testing and duplication of patient data, both of which can lead to higher costs without adequately addressing co-morbidity issues. By contrast, providers within the behavioral health field have long been moving toward a recovery-focused approach that inherently promotes interdisciplinary teamwork. It’s an approach that harnesses the full potential of “progressive elaboration,” a term widely used in the project management field.

Progressive elaboration is a process of “continuously improving and detailing a plan as more detailed and specific information becomes available, producing more accurate and complete plans.”3 Using this methodology, a patient’s plan of care continues to be fine-tuned as providers work together, resulting in fewer inadvertent errors.

Because the entire team of behavioral providers regularly asks patients about their adherence to treatment plans or medication regimens routine follow-up and accountability are strengthened. And now, providers can make even more targeted care plans by administering surveys through touch screen assessment systems, allowing patients to report on their moods and conditions. This information is then integrated with in the patient’s health record and can provide additional support to better inform the clinical decision making process for providers.

All of these efforts can also help uncover any gaps or omissions in the patient’s record. For example, a patient visiting a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) might say, “I forgot to tell you that my mother was bipolar.” Rather than limiting that information to the confines of the LCSW’s documentation, that information is made available to the patient’s psychiatrist during the next visit for medication evaluation.

Improving Patient Care

EHR technology makes that possible by offering all providers equal access to patient information that can help prevent errors, make timely decisions, and ensure adherence to prescribed medications and therapies.

Creating Effective Interdisciplinary Teamwork through EHR Technology

A culture of progressive elaboration fosters a sense of teamwork between patient and provider, which generally serves to build trust. This fundamentally collaborative and patient-centered approach helps to meet needs for improved quality of care, lower costs and better patient outcomes.

The Patient-Centered Model

Figure 1 below shows how the collaborative care model can better serve the needs of the multi-condition patient, as chronicled in a recent New England Journal of Medicine study involving depression patients with poorly controlled diabetes and/or heart disease.4

The patient-centered model ensures that the primary care physician, behavioral health team, and care coordinator stay in close communication.

EHR Technology: Vital to Success

Electronic health record (EHR) technology plays an essential role in achieving this model of patient-centered, solution-focused care. An EHR that successfully accommodates and connects primary care physicians, behavioral health teams and care coordinators can help ensure that all are “on the same page” and working to develop an effective, patient-centered and holistic care plan.

In one demonstration of the importance of joining behavioral and medical care, The Center for Integrated Health Solutions (CIHS) recently awarded sizeable state grants to help expedite the integration of behavioral health into medical EHRs. In addition to improved, more coordinated communication, an EHR that includes fully integrated behavioral health and medical modules can help:

- Promote solution-focused care
- Reduce the risk of contraindicated care or conflicting medications
- Provide more timely access to holistic patient data
- Offer better outcomes tracking
- Allow more informed modifications and alterations to the plan of care
- Eliminate redundant medical testing
- Improve patient provider relationships

It’s critical to find a vendor with extensive experience in integrating behavioral health into a comprehensive EHR, however. Many vendors that offer “longitudinal” EHRs have little experience when it comes to accommodating the unique needs of behavioral health providers.

To achieve collaborative care, an EHR that fully integrates behavioral health must provide the following:

- User interfaces that make it simple for providers to create documentation
- Easy ways for interdisciplinary team to share assessments, progress notes and treatment plans
- Ability to customize and revise treatment plans
- Audit reporting modules that allow patients and treatment plans to be tracked and monitored for improved quality
- Concise and consistent documentation that supports accreditation and reimbursement standards

A Team Approach Offers the Best Results

Partnering with an EHR vendor well-versed in behavioral health can make the transition to collaborative care faster and easier. An experienced vendor knows that behavioral health often involves more repeat visits than primary care, as well as very

EHR Technology and Collaborative Care

The right vendor can make sure that all parties communicate well now—and can even offer advice on how to implement and integrate the emerging DSM-5 and ICD-10 standards, reducing errors and administrative costs. Taking full advantage of EHR technology requires a different mindset—one in which all providers have equal access to patient information.

Creating Effective Interdisciplinary Teamwork through EHR Technology
different documentation requirements. For example, a patient who sees a primary care physician twice a year may see a behavioral health therapist once a week.

Keep in mind, also, that medical providers typically use ICD-9 or ICD-10 codes to document medical diagnoses while behavioral health providers generally turn to DSM-4. The right vendor can make sure that all parties communicate well now—and can even offer advice on how to implement and integrate the emerging DSM-5 and ICD-10 standards, reducing errors and administrative costs.

Throughout the process of evaluating how to achieve more collaborative care, it’s important to set small, achievable goals. For most healthcare organizations, it’s better to move toward interoperability in stages rather than to aim for perfection overnight.

**EHR Technology: The Heart of Collaborative Care**

EHR technology can be a powerful ally in providing collaborative care and combating behavioral/medical co-morbidity. However, taking full advantage of this technology requires a different mindset—one in which all providers have equal access to patient information. A progress note entered by an LCSW can be just as vital to a patient’s well-being as a physician’s initial diagnosis of diabetes or heart disease, and vice versa.

“Progressive elaboration” is just a fancy term for the ability to steadily improve patient care day by day. EHR technology makes that possible by offering all providers equal access to patient information that can help prevent errors, make timely decisions, and ensure adherence to prescribed medications and therapies.

Healthcare organizations must foster a different attitude to encourage collaboration between medical and behavioral care providers. In addition, they should consider the benefits of including EHR vendors in their collaborative partnerships. Fostering this kind of holistic collaboration is really the first step toward achieving the loftier goals of lower cost and higher quality care—and better patient outcomes.