CAPSULE COMMENTARIES

Capsule Commentary on Ganzani et al., Trust is the Basis for Effective Suicide Risk Screening and Assessment in Veterans

Kyle Possemato, PhD

Center for Integrated Healthcare, Syracuse Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Syracuse, NY, USA.

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In reaction to high rates of suicide among active duty military personnel and Veterans, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) has implemented wide-spread suicide screening. However, for screening to be an effective early step in preventing suicide, Veterans must be willing to honestly engage in the process. Ganzani and her colleagues¹ gathered qualitative interview data from 34 recent combat Veterans on their perception of the suicide screening process, as well as barriers, facilitators, and perceived consequences of disclosing suicidal thoughts. Similar to previous research,^{2,3} they found that patient barriers included shame, beliefs that thoughts were private, and concern that disclosure would lead to unwanted treatments. Ganzani et al. also found modifiable system and provider-level factors. Provider-level facilitators centered on perceived trustworthiness and clinical skills of screening healthcare providers. System-level factors included concerns regarding triage or other support staff, and that the Veteran did not have a relationship with those being screened. These results provide important guidance and also highlight challenges for healthcare professionals who are conducting suicide screens in ambulatory settings.

While computerized, templated screening measures allow for simple and uniform administration with minimal system and provider burden, Veterans saw them as impersonal and insensitive. The authors provide a framework for how providers can overcome patient concerns: with genuineness, empathy, and using clear, straightforward language. Unfortunately, these are not provider qualities that are always nurtured by fast-paced ambulatory care environments. This

article provides specific guidance on how providers can more clearly and skillfully assess the highly sensitive, stigmatized, and private topic of suicide.

This article's results provide rationale for additional research on barriers and facilitators to suicide disclosure in other high need populations, such as active duty military personnel and individuals with chronic illness. Also, more research is needed to investigate if interventions known to encourage other patient populations to disclose sensitive health information, can also be helpful in individuals with suicidality.⁴ Suicide is a serious problem among returning Veterans. This article brings to light potential barriers to effective routine suicide screening and makes important suggestions for improvement.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflicts with the material in this paper.

Corresponding Author: Kyle Possemato, PhD; Center for Integrated Healthcare, Syracuse Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Syracuse, NY 13210, USA (e-mail: kyle.possemato@va.gov).

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