



HIV & Mental Health: The Basics and Beyond

On June 11th, 2012, the VISN 5 Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center (MIRECC) sponsored a conference entitled "HIV and Mental Health: The Basics and Beyond." The conference was designed to inform VA staff, Veterans, and other interested parties about the unique mental health needs of Veterans with HIV, as well as to increase their knowledge about the current state of HIV diagnosis and treatment. Over 70 VA mental health providers and Veterans from across VISN 5 attended the conference, which was supported by the Office of Mental Health Services (OMHS) and held at the SMC Management Center on the campus of the University of Maryland, Baltimore.

The conference opened with a broad overview of the epidemiology, course, and treatment of HIV, presented by Dr. Kris Ann Oursler, a physician specializing in infectious disease and the Deputy Director of the Baltimore VA Infectious Disease Clinic. The second speaker was Dr. Virginia Kan, an infectious disease specialist who heads the Infectious Disease Laboratory at the VA Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Dr. Kan explained how and why HIV testing is performed in the VA, and discussed HIV risk reduction counseling with at-risk Veterans.

Dr. Glenn Treisman, Director of the AIDS Psychiatry program at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, presented about interactions between serious mental illness and HIV disease, emphasizing ways in which serious mental illness can complicate the treatment of HIV. Dr. Treisman's talk was followed by a related presentation from Dr. Steven Safren, Director of Behavioral Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital. Dr. Safren discussed the impact of depression on HIV treatment, and described methods of improving HIV medication adherence and treatment outcomes by treating depression.



Following a break for lunch, the conference reconvened to discuss more narrowly-defined topics in HIV and mental health. Dr. Ned Saktor, Professor of Neurology at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, presented about the epidemiology, diagnosis, and treatment of HIV-related dementia. Dr. Devang Gandhi, an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and a psychiatrist at the Baltimore VA, presented about substance use epidemiology and treatment among Veterans with HIV. Finally, Derek Spencer, a nurse practitioner and Director of the JACQUES Initiative at the University of Maryland's Institute of Human Virology, presented about spirituality issues related to HIV.

A common theme that emerged throughout the conference was the significant impact that mental health conditions can have on the physical health of persons with HIV, and thus the correspondingly significant impact that VA mental health providers can have on improving health outcomes for Veterans with HIV. Attendees left the conference equipped with new information and new tools for supporting Veterans who are at risk for, or infected with, HIV disease.

To view slides presented at the HIV & Mental Health Conference, please visit our website:

http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/slide_presentations.asp