Collaborative Goal Setting with or without Community Health Worker Support for Patients with Multiple Chronic Conditions

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What was the research about?
Ongoing health problems, such as diabetes or high blood pressure, are on the rise in the United States. Setting goals and breaking them down into smaller steps may help patients manage these ongoing health problems.

In this study, the research team wanted to learn if goal setting with support from a community health worker, or CHW, helped patients work on their goals and improve their health. CHWs are people from the community trained to help others with their health needs. All patients in the study set goals with their doctors. The team compared patients who had CHW support for meeting these goals with those who didn't have such support.

What were the results?
After nine months, patients with and without CHW support didn't differ in how they rated their physical health. Patients in both groups had higher ratings of physical health at the end of the study.

Compared with patients who didn't have CHW support, those who did reported higher quality of health care. Patients with CHW support were also less likely to have more than one hospital stay during the study or return to the hospital in the same month if they did have a hospital stay.

After nine months, patients with and without CHW support didn't differ in:

- Management of ongoing health problems
- Mental health
- Confidence to manage their health
- Time spent in the hospital, if they had a hospital stay

Who was in the study?
The study included 592 patients living in neighborhoods with limited resources in Philadelphia. Of these, 94 percent were African American, and 2 percent were Hispanic. The average age was 53, and 62 percent were women. Patients had public insurance or no insurance. All had two or more ongoing health problems or one ongoing health problem and smoked. Patients received care from an academic clinic, a Veterans Affairs medical center, or a clinic that serves people with limited resources.

What did the research team do?
The research team assigned patients by chance to one of two groups: goal setting with CHW support or goal setting without support. Patients in both groups reviewed a handout describing behaviors that could help them manage their health problems. Then patients chose one health problem and set a long-term goal with their doctors.

After setting the goal, patients in the group receiving support met with a CHW. The CHW helped them set short-term goals, create a plan to help reach their
goals, and connect to a weekly support group with other patients. CHWs talked with patients weekly for six months in their homes, communities, clinics, or by phone. CHWs also provided emotional support and feedback on patients’ progress. Patients in the second group kept working on their goals without CHW support.

Patients in both groups took a survey at the start of the study and again six and nine months later.

Patients, caregivers, and healthcare professionals helped design the study and adapt the goal-setting program.

What were the limits of the study?
The study took place in one city. Results may differ for patients living in other areas. The research team didn’t have information for veterans who had hospital stays outside of the Department of Veterans Affairs network.

Future research could test the CHW program in other places or for a longer time.

How can people use the results?
Health clinics can use the results of this study when considering ways to help patients manage ongoing health problems.

To learn more about this project, visit www.pcori.org/Long170.