

VA MENTAL HEALTH

VHA Improved Certain Prescribing Practices, but Needs to Strengthen Treatment Plan Oversight

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2018, of the roughly 6 million veterans who received services from VHA, approximately 2 million had a diagnosis for at least one mental health condition. Treatments for such mental health conditions can include psychotropic medications or non-pharmacologic therapies, which can be prescribed or offered by VA providers in outpatient settings including primary and specialty care.

GAO was asked to review how mental health treatment decisions are made by providers in VAMCs and monitored by VHA. This report examines, among other things, (1) factors that contribute to providers' treatment decisions for veterans with mental health conditions, (2) VHA's guidance for documenting mental health treatment plans, (3) VHA's monitoring of whether providers document their consideration of different treatment options, and (4) VHA's efforts to improve the treatment of veterans prescribed psychotropic medications. GAO reviewed VHA documents and a nongeneralizable sample of veterans' medical records from five VAMCs (selected for variety in facility complexity and location); analyzed data on psychotropic medication prescribing; and interviewed VHA and VAMC officials.

What GAO Recommends

VHA should (1) disseminate guidance reflecting its expectation that providers document mental health treatment plans in an easily identifiable way, and (2) implement an approach for monitoring whether these treatment plans include consideration of treatment options. VHA agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View GAO-19-465. For more information, contact Debra A. Draper at (202) 512-7114 or draperd@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Officials from the five selected Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers (VAMC) GAO spoke with reported various factors that contribute to providers' mental health treatment decisions, including decisions regarding the prescribing of psychotropic medications and the offering of non-pharmacologic therapy. Examples of reported factors include: VAMC resources, such as the availability of appointments with mental health providers in specialty care, and the complexity of veterans' mental health conditions, such as the veterans' diagnoses and treatment history.

Officials with VA's Veterans Health Administration (VHA) told GAO that specialty mental health care providers are expected to document mental health treatment plans in an easily identifiable way in veterans' medical records, but VHA has not developed guidance explicitly addressing this expectation. For example, VHA's mental health services handbook requires that treatment plans include certain components, but does not specify where to document the plan within a veteran's medical record. As a result, there is a risk that a provider may be unable to readily access information about a veteran's mental health treatment, including the use of medication or therapy, during changes in a veteran's care.

VHA has not monitored whether mental health providers in specialty care document the required consideration of different treatment options—such as psychotropic medications or non-pharmacologic therapy—within mental health treatment plans. VHA officials told GAO that VHA relies on the Joint Commission (an independent, not-for-profit organization that accredits and certifies health care organizations) to assess specialty mental health treatment plans as part of the organization's accreditation process for each VAMC. However, the Joint Commission's standards do not specifically assess whether providers consider different treatment options. As a result, VHA cannot ensure that providers are considering all available treatment options and providing the most appropriate treatments to each veteran.

VHA has taken steps to improve veterans' mental health treatment through the Psychotropic Drug Safety Initiative (PDSI)—an initiative focused on the safe and effective prescribing of certain psychotropic medications. For example, the first phase included a performance metric aimed at decreasing the percentage of veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder receiving one or more outpatient prescriptions for a benzodiazepine (a medication used to treat anxiety) because of risks associated with the medication. VHA reported a nationwide 5.4 percentage point decrease in the prescribing of this medication for these patients, as well as improvements in the majority of the initiative's other performance metrics.