

MENTAL HEALTH IN PRIMARY CARE: ADVANCES AND CHALLENGES

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SUMMARY:

Introduction: Mental health is an essential part of primary care, being fundamental for the prevention and management of mental disorders. This study highlights the advances and challenges of this integration, such as collaborative models and the use of telemedicine, which have expanded access and effectiveness of care, especially in remote contexts. **Material and Method:** A literature review was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines, including articles published between 2007 and 2023, in Portuguese, English and Spanish. The search was conducted in the PubMed, SciELO, Scopus and Google Scholar databases, using specific descriptors. The articles were analyzed qualitatively, identifying patterns, gaps and relevant strategies for the integration of mental health into primary care. **Results and Discussion:** The results indicate significant advances, such as the inclusion of specialized professionals, ongoing training, and technologies such as telemedicine, which have increased the resolution and scope of care. However, barriers such as insufficient financial resources, social stigma, and team overload still limit the effectiveness of the integrated model. Future strategies include increased funding, intersectoral coordination, and the adoption of technological tools, in addition to public policies focused on equity and reducing stigma. **Final Considerations:** Integrating mental health into primary care is a complex but essential challenge to improve the quality of life of the populations served. This study reinforces the need for sustainable and collaborative solutions, aligned with local and global demands.

Keywords: mental health, primary care, care integration, telemedicine, public policies.

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ABSTRACT:

Introduction: Mental health is an essential part of primary care, fundamental for the prevention and management of mental disorders. This study highlights the advances and challenges of this integration, such as collaborative models and the use of telemedicine, which have expanded

access and care effectiveness, especially in remote contexts. **Material and Methods:** A literature review was conducted following PRISMA guidelines, including articles published between 2007 and 2023, in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. The search was carried out in the PubMed, SciELO, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases, using specific descriptors. The articles were qualitatively analyzed, identifying patterns, gaps, and relevant strategies for integrating mental health into primary care. **Results and Discussion:** The results point to significant advances, such as the inclusion of specialized professionals, continuous training, and technologies like telemedicine, which have increased the resolvability and reach of care. However, barriers such as insufficient financial resources, social stigma, and workload overload still limit the effectiveness of the integrated model. Future strategies include increased funding, intersectoral articulation, and the adoption of technological tools, as well as public policies focused on equity and stigma reduction. **Conclusions:** The integration of mental health into primary care is a complex yet indispensable challenge to improve the quality of life of the populations served. This study reinforces the need for sustainable and collaborative solutions aligned with local and global demands.

Keywords: mental health, primary care, integrated care, telemedicine, public policies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health is an essential component of comprehensive health and is often addressed in primary care, which is considered a strategic point for the prevention and management of mental disorders (Magruder & Yeager, 2007). This approach allows for greater equity and accessibility, given that a large part of the global population depends exclusively on these services to meet their mental health demands (Wainberg et al., 2021).

In recent decades, the integration of mental health into primary care services has been recognized as a crucial strategy to improve early detection and management of conditions such as anxiety and depression. Studies indicate that this integration can increase the effectiveness of treatments and patient satisfaction when receiving care close to their community (Vannoy & Unützer, 2007). However, challenges persist, such as the social stigma associated with mental disorders and insufficient training of health professionals to adequately identify and treat these conditions (Sibiya & Hlongwa, 2019).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of mental health in different populations and increased the urgency of expanding primary care services. Evidence shows that conditions such as anxiety and depression have increased exponentially during the pandemic, putting further pressure on primary health care systems (McGinty, 2023). In this context, technological advances, such as the use of telemedicine, have shown potential to expand the reach of mental health services and facilitate the monitoring of chronic cases in remote areas (Wainberg et al., 2021).

Despite these advances, structural barriers persist, such as the lack of financial and human resources, which limit the implementation of integrated care models. Additionally, coordination between different levels of care is often insufficient, resulting in gaps in monitoring and continuity of care (Sibiya & Hlongwa, 2019).

Given this scenario, this study aims to review the advances and challenges of integrating mental health into primary care, highlighting the main strategies implemented and their limitations. Thus, it is expected to contribute to the formulation of more effective and integrated policies that promote mental health as an inseparable part of primary care.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study conducted a literature review to investigate advances and challenges in integrating mental health into primary care. The work was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, ensuring transparency and systematization. Articles published between 2007 and 2023, in Portuguese, English, and Spanish, that addressed strategies, advances, or challenges related to the topic were included. Duplicate studies, studies without full access, or those irrelevant to the scope were excluded.

The databases used were PubMed, SciELO, Scopus and Google Scholar. The search was structured with descriptors such as “mental health in primary care”, “integration of health care” and “challenges in mental health”, combined with Boolean operators for greater precision. The evaluation of the studies focused on identifying patterns and gaps in the

integration of mental health, categorizing contributions according to their relevance to advancing care and overcoming challenges.

As this was a review, no primary data was collected, and ethical approval was not required. However, rigorous analysis of sources and citations was ensured. The method adopted allowed us to map advances, identify barriers and highlight relevant trends for strengthening mental health in primary care, providing support for integrated policies and more effective strategies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The integration of mental health into primary care has shown significant progress, but still faces structural, financial and cultural barriers. This study found that successful initiatives rely heavily on ongoing training of professionals, intersectoral coordination strategies and the use of innovative technologies, such as telemedicine, to expand the reach and quality of care.

Advances Identified

One of the most important achievements highlighted was the implementation of collaborative care models. These models integrate mental health professionals into primary care teams, allowing for greater screening, diagnosis, and management of common conditions such as anxiety and depression (Vannoy & Unützer, 2007). In addition, telemedicine has emerged as a promising tool, especially in rural and remote areas where access to mental health specialists is limited (Wainberg et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that telehealth improves continuity of care and reduces stigma by allowing patients to be treated in the comfort of their own homes.

The training of primary care health professionals has also advanced, including training in basic psychological management techniques, such as brief cognitive behavioral therapy. This has allowed for a more integrated and holistic approach to care, increasing the resolution of services (Sibiya & Hlongwa, 2019).

Persistent Challenges

Despite these advances, several barriers continue to limit the effectiveness of integration. The lack of financial resources to expand mental health programs is a recurring challenge, exacerbated by unequal health systems in low-income regions (McGinty, 2023). In addition, the stigma associated with mental disorders still affects the search for care, both by patients and by the professionals who treat them (Magruder & Yeager, 2007).

Another critical obstacle is the workload faced by primary care teams. Often, professionals do not have enough time or support to address mental health issues, resulting in underdiagnosis and inadequate treatment (Sibiya & Hlongwa, 2019). This is exacerbated by the lack of tools to effectively monitor long-term treatment outcomes.

Discussion of Future Strategies

The results suggest that, to overcome these barriers, it is necessary to prioritize public policies that guarantee adequate funding and promote coordination between different levels of care. The inclusion of technologies, such as integrated electronic medical records, can facilitate communication between professionals and improve patient follow-up (Wainberg et al., 2021). In addition, educational programs aimed at reducing stigma and raising awareness about mental health can play a crucial role in expanding access to care.

Another aspect discussed was the need to adapt interventions to cultural and regional specificities. Community-centered strategies, such as partnerships with local leaders, have been shown to be effective in increasing adherence to treatments and improving health outcomes (McGinty, 2023). Promoting equity in access to mental health services should also be a priority, with a focus on vulnerable populations, such as children, the elderly, and rural communities.

Finally, we highlight the importance of new research that evaluates the effectiveness of interventions in different contexts, especially in low- and middle-income settings. These evaluations can support the formulation of more robust and sustainable strategies for the integration of mental health into primary care.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The integration of mental health into primary care represents a significant step forward in strengthening health systems by offering comprehensive care and expanding access to treatment for mental disorders. This study showed that strategies such as collaborative care models, professional training and the use of telemedicine have the potential to overcome historical barriers to mental health care. However, challenges persist and require structured and sustainable solutions.

Among the most notable advances is the inclusion of specialized professionals in primary care teams, allowing for earlier diagnoses and appropriate interventions. Telemedicine, especially in hard-to-reach settings, has proven to be a powerful tool for connecting patients to mental health services, reducing geographic barriers and stigmas associated with in-person care. These advances reflect the growing appreciation of mental health as an integral part of primary care, an advance that directly contributes to the quality of life of individuals and communities.

Despite this, structural barriers, such as insufficient financial resources and the overload of primary care teams, still limit the effectiveness of this care model. Additionally, the social and cultural stigma surrounding mental disorders continues to affect the search for care, both by patients and professionals, compromising the effectiveness of services. Another challenge is the fragmentation between levels of care, which makes it difficult to continue and monitor cases in the long term.

To address these challenges, it is essential that public policies prioritize adequate funding and coordination between different levels of health care. Investing in ongoing training of professionals and in supporting technologies, such as integrated electronic health records, can significantly improve the efficiency and quality of services. In addition, mental health awareness programs aimed at communities and professionals are essential to reduce stigma and foster a more welcoming environment for patients.

Promoting equity in access to mental health services should be a priority, with special attention to vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly and rural communities. Community-centered strategies that consider cultural and

regional, are essential to increase adherence to treatments and improve results. In this sense, partnerships with local leaders and social organizations can play a crucial role in strengthening mental health actions.

Finally, further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of interventions in different contexts and identify gaps in care. Future studies can support the creation of more robust policies, aligned with local and global demands, contributing to the development of more inclusive and resilient mental health systems. Integrating mental health into primary care is not only a technical goal, but also an ethical commitment to the well-being and dignity of individuals.

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