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WHAT'S NEW

Gauge mental health in minutes

By Shari Rudavsky

A University of Evansville professor has developed a mental-health assessment tool -- available on a PDA or through a Web-based system -- that can help gauge someone's psychological status within about three minutes.

The CelestHealth Clinical Report system draws upon a paper version of itself but gives providers and patients an immediate evaluation and enables them to track progress. The system consists of a series of key questions that evaluate a person's well-being, psychological symptoms and life functioning.

"We can measure complete mental health very efficiently in less than three minutes," said S. Mark Kopta, chairman of psychology at the University of Evansville.

Shortly after the patient completes the questionnaire, the therapist receives a mental-health profile. This includes alerts on whether the patient is suicidal, depressed, anxious or a danger to others.

It also provides information on whether psychotherapy might help the patient grapple with his or her issues.

In addition, the profiles are color-coded, with red connoting a special alert and yellow signifying that the patient is at risk.

"It is like a blood test," Kopta said. "The therapist sees it first and then would sit down with the patient and discuss the implications of it."

Starting in the next few weeks, the system will be tested at three university mental-health centers: the University of Minnesota, Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and Loyola Marymount University in California.

Kopta and his colleagues hope to make it available at many more university counseling centers this winter and introduce it to physicians' offices in late spring.

Primary-care providers, in particular, may welcome the new system. About 70 percent of a physician's patients see their doctor for a stress-related disorder, Kopta said. Many do not have the time to do full mental-health assessments, so this tool will help them identify those who need additional help.

The new system will enable individuals and their therapists to see how they're progressing by looking at a profile from session to session.

"This is very important. People like feedback," Kopta said. "People can see and track their behavioral health over time, just like they can with their cardiovascular system."