

Presentation 10 – Don Ciccone

On-Line Treatment for Veterans with War-Related Multisymptom Illness

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Background

- As far back as the American Civil War, soldiers have reported nonspecific ailments that could not be attributed to an underlying medical cause.
- The prevalence of GWI or similar symptom-based illness may be as high as 45% to 60% in deployed personnel. (Fukuda et al, 1998; Baker et al, 1997, Wolfe et al, 2002)

Background (continued)

- Despite an uncertain etiology, GWI and other symptom-based ailments have substantial consequences for veteran health:
- Frequent VA medical visitation
- Physical disability
- Psychological distress/psychiatric morbidity.

Study Rationale

- In order to address the anticipated increase in GWI, new and more efficient treatments are urgently needed to augment or replace standard VA care.

Rationale for Telemedicine

- Fortunately, an effective treatment using cognitive-behavioral techniques (CBT) has been developed to ameliorate symptom-related distress and reduce unnecessary healthcare utilization.
- Despite evidence of CBT efficacy provided by RCTs, a major limitation is that patients are often nonadherent. Only 38% were adherent in a recent large scale trial of CBT.
- Clinical effectiveness of CBT is undermined if fewer than half of those who need treatment are likely to attend.

A Randomized Trial of Telemedicine

- The proposed study will address this public health problem by testing a novel treatment for GWI- On-Line CBT using instant voice messaging (voice stream technology).
- Treatment is administered over the Internet and allows veterans to speak with CBT practitioners in real time just as they would on the telephone.

Study Aims

- Aim 1. Determine the efficacy of On-Line CBT for veterans with GWI who are frequent consumers of ambulatory medical care.**
- Aim 2. Determine whether CBT for veterans with GWI leads to a reduction in the cost of VA healthcare**

Study Design

150 High utilizing veterans will be assigned to one of three study conditions:

- I On-Line CBT + Customary Medical Care (N=50)
- II In-Person CBT + Customary Medical Care (N=50)
- III Customary Medical Care Only (N=50)

Study Design

- Intent-To-Treat Strategy
- Primary Outcome: Utilization of VA medical services
- Assessment Protocol: Electronic chart review 1 yr before and 1 yr after treatment

VA Significance

- The proposed study is intended to reduce unnecessary VA utilization while preserving or improving physical function, patient satisfaction and other quality of life indicators.
- Treatment can be made readily available to veterans regardless of their geographic location.

Long Term VA Benefits

Long-term benefits may also include:

- Lower costs for medical care
- Improved allocation of VA resources
- Improved quality of life for GWI veterans
- Less psychiatric morbidity
- Lower risk of iatrogenic injury.