Addressing the Mental Health Care Needs of Veterans Living in Rural Areas: A Systematic Review

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Introduction

• Over 50% of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with a mental disorder.
• Most of these returning veterans reside in rural areas.
• Veterans from rural areas have lower mental health quality-of-life scores and higher suicide rates than veterans from urban areas.

Study Question

What is the current state of mental health care for veterans residing in rural areas?

Search Strategy

Databases searched (PubMed, PsycINFO, Google Scholar) used key words (veteran, military, mental health, PTSD, depression, rural, health care, telemedicine): 63,085

Results

• A broad range of interventions are being utilized to address the mental health care needs of veterans in rural areas.
• Most widely reported among these interventions was the use of telemental health care services.
• Services such as community education, family education, & specialized care teams were also reported.

Evidence Synthesis

Major themes concerning the state of mental healthcare for veterans living in rural areas were abstracted from all articles. Information on three following subcategories was also extracted:

1. Best methods/practices to treat veterans in rural areas with mental health problems.
2. Use of telemental health to treat veterans in rural areas with mental health problems.
3. Barriers to treating veterans in rural areas with mental health problems.

Conclusions

• Telemental health is the most widely used intervention & has been shown to be as effective as usual care.
• There are still many barriers to care associated with telemental health10, such as distance to care sites, age of the patients and practitioners, and information technology infrastructure.
• Other modalities such as community and family education & specialized care teams are being tested and initial results have been positive.
• Considerable focus has been placed on telemental health, but there is opportunity for other emerging methods to prove their efficacy.

Recommendations

1. Results of the review should be shared with the Department of Veterans Affairs and other veterans and mental health advocacy groups.
2. Future studies should attempt to employ larger sample sizes and more nationally representative population samples.
3. This review can inform researchers as to the current evidence for various types of interventions and the types of evidence still required to determine best practices for mental healthcare for veterans in rural areas.

References