



Care Pathways Study summary

Study reinforces critical role that mental health specialists serve in reducing total cost of care for plan sponsors

A new Optum study identified significant cost savings for plan sponsors when members with chronic co-occurring medical and behavioral health conditions receive specialty mental health care as part of their early treatment intervention.

Optum conducted the study of retrospective claims data to better understand the different care pathways members take and how those journeys impact total cost of care (TCOC).

Using data from members with medical, behavioral health and pharmacy claims, the study analyzed the pathways of individuals with at least one of 25 common chronic medical conditions, including arthritis, asthma, ischemic heart disease and diabetes, among others, and a co-occurring mental health condition diagnosis of mild-to-severe depressive, generalized anxiety, bipolar, schizophrenia or substance use disorder. Of mental illnesses, anxiety, depressive and substance use disorders (SUDs) are among the most common, and depressive illnesses tend to co-occur with substance use and anxiety disorders.*

* Johns Hopkins Medicine. Mental health statistics. Accessed May 15, 2023.



Anxiety, depression and SUDs are among the most common mental illnesses, and depressive illnesses tend to co-occur with substance use and anxiety disorders.

Integrated behavioral health care demonstrates savings with reduction in total cost of care

Compared to those who did not receive specialty mental health care, the study demonstrated significantly lower TCOCs for some patients when they received combined specialty mental health care and medical and medication management in the first 4 months of treatment. Specifically, costs per patient per month were reduced.

Depressive disorder with chronic medical conditions

Integrated behavioral health care



No behavioral health care



12%
cost reduction
of TCOC

- Medical
- Behavioral
- Pharmacy

Depressive disorder with SUD

Integrated behavioral health care



No behavioral health care



11%
cost reduction
of TCOC

Generalized anxiety disorder with SUDs

Integrated behavioral health care



No behavioral health care



10%
cost reduction
of TCOC

Behavioral health total health outcomes study (2020). Completed by Optum Health Healthcare Economics team. Ten Eyck, Azocar, Kawamura, et al.

Rigorous methodology proves TCOC savings

This is the first study of its kind to confirm that combining behavioral health with medical care and medication management impacts TCOC for plan sponsors. Methodological issues – such as duplicate counting of members with multiple chronic conditions, unmatched population cohorts and insufficient sample sizes – called into question the accuracy of previous industry research on TCOC.

To correct for these challenges and ensure the analysis and results were evidence-based, accurate and meaningful, Optum applied proprietary data and analytics resources along with the following study design best practices:



The study examined utilization patterns for new episodes of care, defined as a first claim with no prior evidence of treatment for the condition within 60 days.



Statistical risk adjustment was applied to ensure patient characteristics (e.g., diagnoses, gender, age, race, ethnicity, median household income, health care utilization, etc.) were equivalent between the comparison groups. This ensured the only key differences between the 2 groups being compared were if the individuals had or had not received behavioral health care.



Based on treatment guidelines, patient records were assessed over 18 months to account for the typical treatment period and longer-term cost impact.



Closing critical gaps in care

The Optum study reinforces the positive impact of integrating medical and behavioral health care for certain conditions. With rising health care costs and the growing need for mental health care, plan sponsors are proactively seeking financially sustainable strategies to help members access the care they need. With clearer insight into the interplay among behavioral health, medical care and medication management, plan sponsors can be better positioned to manage costs and connect members to the right care at the right time and level.

Optum understands the need to deliver integrated care and control costs intelligently. We help plan sponsors precisely pinpoint where and how to intervene. Our pioneering, proprietary analytics generate insights that help guide members to high-impact, integrated care tailored to their individual needs. We connect people to an extensive network of providers, innovative tools that improve access to care and resources that inspire them to be more engaged in their own wellness.

About Optum

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