Statement on Trauma-Informed Care

Student National Medical Association
Health Policy and Legislative Affairs Committee
Statement on Trauma-Informed Care

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INTRODUCTION

Established in 1964 by students of Meharry Medical College, the Student National Medical Association (SNMA) is the nation’s oldest and largest organization focused on the needs and concerns of medical students of color. In addition, the SNMA is dedicated to practices leading to better healthcare for minority and underrepresented communities.

BACKGROUND

According to statistics published in 2015 by the Center for Disease Control, 1 in 7 children in one year will experience abuse or neglect and 20 people every minute will be victims of intimate partner violence.\(^2\)\(^,\)\(^6\) 1 in 2 women and 1 in 5 men will experience sexual violence in their lifetime.\(^6\)

Violence and abuse are widespread and know no racial or socioeconomic boundaries, although marginalized communities experience higher rates of violence. While violence and injury cause significant morbidity and mortality in the United States, the scars last long after bodies heal.

Trauma is defined as experiences that produce intense emotional fear or distress, often resulting in long-term physiological and psychological consequences.\(^1\) While trauma is not confined to any one demographic, the additional burdens of institutionalized racism, disproportionately high rates of poverty, and mass incarceration coupled with inadequate access to medical and social services make African Americans and Hispanics very susceptible to the long-term consequences of trauma. With the prevalence of violence, abuse, and injury, it is essential to the progress of medical care that we take steps to incorporate trauma-informed care into our practice and policies.

Trauma informed care is a service provision model that aims to promote healing and reduce risk of re-traumatization. There are six core principles:\(^1\)

1. To ensure the physical and emotional safety of patients and prevent additional trauma
2. To instill trustworthiness and be transparent in implementing services and care
3. To collaborate with communities by prioritizing their knowledge and experiences
4. To empower communities through shared decision-making
5. To promote personal choice
6. To acknowledge and address discrimination, privilege, and historical trauma in an intersectional approach
These principles require partnership of the medical establishment with communities and social services like WIC and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Community Health Workers (CHWs) are also vital to this effort and the Affordable Care Act includes funding structures for community health workers to have adequate resources to aid in these efforts and to receive continuing education and training.¹ It has been demonstrated that when care providers are trained in trauma-informed care, they experience improved patient relationships and suggestions of increased adherence to medical advice.⁴

**Scope of the Problem**

The most comprehensive work on the impact of trauma on health has been the Adverse Childhood Experience study. This study looked at the relationship of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and household dysfunction and associated health risk behaviors and disease in adulthood. The prevalence of childhood trauma is high, with 64% of the population reportedly having at least one adverse childhood experience. The impact on health is cumulative and those with 4 or more ACEs are at a twelvefold increased risk of alcoholism, drug abuse, depression and suicide and also have much higher risk of ischemic heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, and liver disease than those in the population without reported adverse experiences.³ Patients with more adverse events have also been found to have increased health care utilization. Additional studies have found that chronic stressors can disrupt the structure and function of the neuroendocrine and immune systems, leading to epigenetic modification to stress response which can be passed down to future generations.⁵ It is crucial to the health of our nation now and in future to focus on trauma-informed care as a method to breaking this cycle.

**Statement of Position and Recommendations**

The SNMA acknowledges the prevalence of violence and the importance of incorporating trauma-informed care into practice. Our recommendations are to:

1. Protect the provisions for community health workers as outlined in the Affordable Care Act.
2. Promote and support institutional adoption of trauma-informed care models to ensure safety, mitigate adverse experiences, and prevent re-traumatization among our patients.

3. Advocate for the protection of WIC and EBT services.

4. Advocate for the use of screening tools for trauma and their ready availability as part of electronic medical records.
REFERENCES


