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### Briefing Series on the Role of Psychology in Health Care *Primary Care*

- According to the Institute of Medicine, primary care is the provision of “integrated, accessible health care services by clinicians who are accountable for addressing a large majority of personal health care needs, developing a sustained partnership with patients, and practicing in the context of family and community.”<sup>1</sup>
- Mental and behavioral health services offered by psychologists and other qualified providers in primary care settings play a significant role in the prevention, diagnosis, management, and treatment of the leading causes of death in the U.S., including heart disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease.<sup>2</sup>
- Co-occurring mental disorders (e.g., anxiety and depression) can worsen the course of chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, epilepsy, and cancer.<sup>3-7</sup> Psychological distress has also been found to weaken the immune system.<sup>8</sup>
- Physicians are increasingly pressured to diagnose and treat mental and behavioral health problems that they are often not adequately trained to diagnose or treat. As many as 70% of primary care visits are driven by patients’ psychological problems, such as anxiety, panic, depression, and stress.<sup>9</sup> More than 80% of patients with medically unexplained symptoms receive psychosocial treatment in primary care by a physician—only 10% will follow up on a referral to a mental health provider that is not co-located.<sup>10</sup>
- Furthermore, in as many as 70% of individuals with depression, their depression goes undetected in primary care.<sup>11</sup> Of individuals who die by suicide, about 90% had a mental disorder, and 40% had visited their primary care physician within the month before their suicide. Thus, primary care is an important setting for detecting, treating, and managing mental and behavioral health problems.<sup>12</sup>

#### **| How Psychologists Can Contribute**

- Psychologists provide vital mental and behavioral health services in primary care. They identify and modify behaviors to promote individuals’ health and wellness across the lifespan. A significant and growing number of psychologists (e.g., in such areas as health, clinical, counseling, family, and rehabilitation psychology and geropsychology) provide interprofessional, team-based care in pediatric, adult, and family-oriented primary care settings in both the public and private sectors.

- Primary care physicians increasingly rely on the services of psychologists, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Increased access to psychologists in primary care improves the coordination of care and treatment planning, while reducing the stigma associated with seeking mental and behavioral health treatment.<sup>10</sup>
- In primary care, psychologists recognize and treat mental and behavioral health disorders earlier, often saving significant costs, decreasing the load on medical providers, and delivering services in an approach desired by many patients.<sup>13</sup>
- Psychologists provide an array of individual, group, and family interventions effective for depression, anxiety, pain, and adjustment issues surrounding chronic illness. They help patients with life-threatening illnesses manage symptoms and cope with medical interventions and their side effects. Psychologists also provide support to address family needs, enhance communication, and promote recovery.
- Formal assessment and diagnostic services delivered by psychologists provide a thorough, standardized approach to understanding the patient's presenting problem, thereby enabling appropriate treatment planning and intervention.<sup>14</sup> Implementation of evidence-based treatment modalities by psychologists has been shown to improve both physical and mental health.<sup>9,10,15</sup>
- Research has also shown a “cost offset of 20 to 40 percent for primary care patients who receive behavioral health services.”<sup>10</sup> Fewer hospitalizations result in significant cost reductions for patients with chronic physical illness and/or mental health conditions.<sup>16</sup> Access to behavioral health services during medical visits likewise improves treatment adherence,<sup>17</sup> which has been associated with \$105 billion in annual avoidable health care costs.<sup>18</sup>
- Psychologists have a strong research foundation and can contribute to the design, implementation, and evaluation of behavioral interventions that improve patients' treatment compliance and the overall management of acute and chronic health conditions in primary care.

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