

“Teaming Up” to Increase Access to Psychiatric Consultation for Dufferin-Caledon Patients: A DAFHT and SHIP Initiative

Maureen Tegar, Chris Brown (SHIP), Kate Hartnett, Lianne Barbour, and Alex Newman

OVERVIEW

What ‘is possible,’ even in a small way, when mental health care needs are addressed with a collaborative spirit, innovation, and willingness to share resources? A psychiatric consultation clinic for Dufferin-Caledon patients – supported by Services and Housing in the Province (SHIP) and facilitated by the Dufferin Area Family Health Team (DAFHT) - is an example of such ‘possibility’.

Historically, within Dufferin-Caledon, access to psychiatry has been limited and at times unavailable, requiring physicians to refer patients to services outside of area and, unless provided virtually, compelling patients to travel to other communities to participate in a psychiatric assessment. Moreover, referrals for psychiatric consults have frequently resulted in lengthy wait times that frustrate patients struggling with mental health needs, their family members, and referring physicians. Over the years, the Dufferin Area Family Health Team has engaged in various efforts, alongside other community agencies, to address this gap in mental health care. These efforts have resulted in some past successes, including DAFHT physicians and patients being supported by a part-time psychiatrist for several years.

In February 2023, with the support of SHIP and a SHIP affiliated psychiatrist, a psychiatric consultation clinic was launched for two half-days per month. This “teaming up” was the result of a shared motivation to address obstacles for patients and challenges faced by Dufferin-Caledon physicians in referring patients for psychiatric consultations. In April 2023, an additional psychiatrist (previously affiliated with DAFHT) also began providing access to psychiatric consultation for referred patients through this initiative.

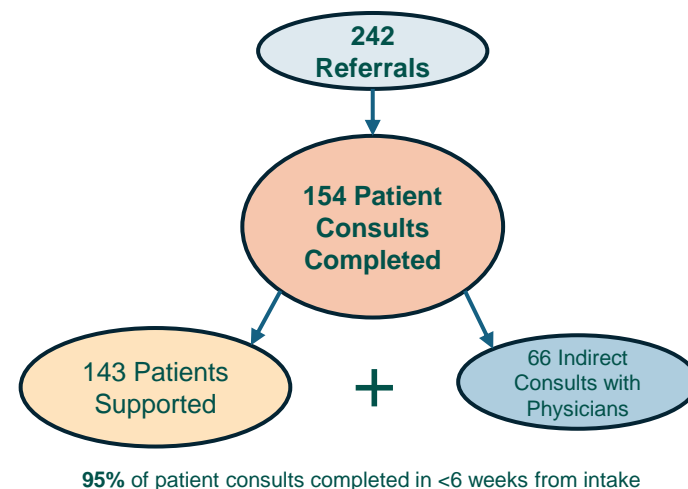
With dedicated appointment times – monthly and weekly – provided by two psychiatrists, access to consultation ‘in-community’ has become more available to patients. An intake process, facilitated by therapists of the DAFHT Mental Health Intake Team, has also supported patients and physicians with referral and follow-up. Referrals require the consent of the patient, and referrals for patients under 16 or patients over 60+ with cognitive issues are excluded.

As a result of the psychiatric consultation clinic, there has been improved access and reduced barriers to care. From April 2023 to March 2024, 242 patients were referred for psychiatric consultation by DAFHT affiliated physicians to this initiative – including referrals ‘in process’, referrals declined by patients, referrals redirected due to specific consult needs. 154 patients were supported with a psychiatric consultation, including direct and indirect consultations, and 95% of patients were seen in less than six weeks from completion of the referral process. The primary reasons for referral, as indicated by the referring physician, were medication recommendations (93%), treatment recommendations (80%), and clarification of diagnosis (64%).

Although a need for additional psychiatry services in Dufferin-Caledon remains, increased access to psychiatric consults – aided by “teaming up” with another community mental health organization – is making some difference, particularly in reducing wait times and providing patients and physicians with direct and indirect consultation in the management of complex mental health issues.

RESULTS: WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT?

(April 1, 2023-March 31, 2024)



REFLECTIONS: WHAT DO PATIENTS SAY?

“I like that he took my feedback and cautiously adjusted my medication and gave notes to my family doctor.”

“I am very thankful for this program. It has helped me a great deal.”

“The psychiatrist very clearly understood my situation, both from what was provided to him by my family doctor, prior to the consultation, and the information I provided during the consultation. He understood what would work for me based on my personality type and my current circumstances.”

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Continued need for increased access to psychiatry services
- Absence of follow-up
- Need for longer term care vs. consultation/assessment only

PHYSICIAN FEEDBACK

(Based on 2024 physician survey)

75% of physicians satisfied with response time between referral sent and patient contact by Intake Therapist

88% of physicians identified the consult as helpful in providing direction/support for ongoing patient care

100% indicated that recommendations were implemented

REFLECTIONS: WHAT DO PHYSICIANS SAY?

“Great consults and always helpful suggestions”

“Very comprehensive and many suggestions for future management”

“Clear consults with clear diagnosis and management options”

“We need more access to in person consults. I try to save the most difficult patients (for psychiatry referral) so it would be great if there were more consults available.”

“Need psychiatrists who can follow long-term”

“Overall, the challenge in family medicine is getting regular psychiatry follow-up for complex mental health patients.”

RECOMMENDATIONS: MOVING FORWARD

- To continue to explore what is ‘possible together’ through this collaborative effort and our shared goal: to better support patients struggling with mental health needs and their physicians.
- To advocate for increased psychiatry services within Dufferin-Caledon as an essential part of community health care.
- To continue to facilitate a patient-centred psychiatry referral process which provides patients with a supportive intake experience and offers follow-up referral assistance.