Exploring the impact of ECHO Ontario Integrated Mental and Physical Health on participants’ approach and attitude towards the care of patients with complex needs

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OBJECTIVE

To examine how Project ECHO Integrated Mental and Physical Health (ECHO-IMPH), a virtual tele-education program, influences the attitudes and approaches of health care providers towards patients with co-occurring mental and physical health concerns.

METHODS

Participants were recruited from two cycles of ECHO-IMPH.

Semi-structured interviews (N=22) were conducted by members of the research team.

RESULTS

Three main themes were identified from the interview data:

Enhanced Knowledge and Skills: participants gained a deeper understanding of the interplay between mental and physical health, adopting a more integrated view of care and allowing them to view their patients through a more holistic lens.

Changes in Attitude and Approach: interviewees described how ECHO-IMPH shifted their attitude towards patients with complex needs, from frustration and fatigue to an empathic and patient-centered approach. These changes led to improved patient interactions.

Space for Reflection and Exploration: the ECHO model created safety and validation to support participants’ exploration and reflection of their attitudes and practice. Connecting with other healthcare providers normalized the difficulties participants face with patients with complex needs.

DISCUSSION

The ECHO model creates a safe space for critical reflection of previous practice, helping improve participants’ competence by building knowledge and skills, and increasing their self-efficacy. Reflections can lead to changes in previously held attitudes towards patients with complex needs which, when combined with new knowledge and skills, can create a change towards more patient-centered and evidence-based practice. Based on the shifts in attitude observed and the “disorienting dilemmas” described by some participants in their reflections, our findings suggest that there are elements of transformative learning inherent to the design of the ECHO model.2,3