

Lisa Kearney, PhD, ABPP — Clinical Health Psychologist

A PERSONAL CALL TO DUTY

As the daughter of a Vietnam veteran, Lisa Kearney, PhD, felt the call to service. But she shied away from direct involvement in the military, at least initially.

"I always wanted to serve, but I didn't think I could make it out of basic training," Kearney jokes.

Instead, Kearney is improving service members' health by integrating primary health care and mental health care services.

As the Senior Consultant for National Mental Health Technical Assistance for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Mental Health Operations, she evaluates programs and provides consultation, training and technical assistance to VA facilities across the country. It's an important role, as there were opportunities for improvement in both areas when she began the job.

Primary care practitioners desired assistance in providing the counseling patients sometimes needed, and often requested as part of routine visits, and psychologists needed to adapt practices to help patients make the behavioral changes that could lead to better health.

Bridging the two is an ideal treatment for anyone, but especially for veterans who often need both types of care.

POSITIVE PEER PRESSURE

Kearney first saw the impact that integrated care could have on the lives of veterans when she worked as the chief of psychology service at the South Texas Veterans Health Care System in San Antonio. While there, she called together pharmacists, primary care physicians, diabetes educators, dietitians and psychologists to create a program in which veterans who were successfully managing their diabetes would reach out to other vets who were not doing as well.

The vet who was successfully managing his or her diabetes would encourage others to participate in an interdisciplinary group medical appointment during which an individualized follow-up plan would be created. The program led to tangible improvements in people's health in areas such as blood sugar levels, blood pressure, cholesterol levels and other health indicators.

"That shows when we all come together as a team across different disciplines and play to our strengths, patients and providers both benefit," says Kearney.

CHANGING PRACTICES AND CULTURES

Working as part of an integrated health care team is different than the work structure that many clinical psychologists are currently used to but could be the wave of the future. A team setting often requires a faster pace and shorter sessions with clients but there is also evidence that such team-based-care results in improved health outcomes for patients.

As the VA continues to integrate its services to help veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Kearney hopes that psychologists and students will look to the VA — the nation's largest employer of psychologists — as a potential workplace.

Psychologist staffing has been growing, and there are diverse, fulfilling and plentiful opportunities, such as serving as chiefs of psychology, directors of training, researchers, clinicians and administrators.

"I love integrated care and am passionate about working with others to make this the new norm in all primary care settings," Kearney says.



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CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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