Evaluating the impact of using an online tool within primary care to improve income security of patients with complex health and social needs

**BACKGROUND / PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Interventions addressing social determinants of health are rarely found within the Canadian health care system. Risk factors such as diet, exercise, and alcohol intake are routinely addressed by family medicine. This project is designed to consider income insecurity in clinical decision making like other risk factors and to investigate feasibility and use of a “Get Your Benefits” screening tool to address income security in primary healthcare settings.

Groups in both Ontario and Manitoba have begun addressing income security. Tools have mostly been used within community when compared with primary care. This project’s online screening tool is intended for use with all patients in a primary care setting, but it is primarily targeted to clinics that serve lower-income communities.

**PROJECT GOALS**

Project goals centered on these research questions:

a) Do health care providers find using a tool to address income security in a clinical setting feasible and acceptable?

b) What are the implementation barriers and opportunities for implementing the tool within the workflow of primary health care organizations?

c) What is the perspective of patients on using an online benefit screening tool, its use in the primary care setting and the short-term impact on awareness of benefits and resources?

**PROJECT METHODS**

**Provider Participation**
- Provider + staff training on use of Online Tool at clinic
- Providers use Online Tool with patients

**Patient Participation**
- Patient uses Online Tool at clinic
- Patient completes brief survey after use of Online Tool
- Telephone survey with Patient 1 month after use of Online Tool

**PROJECT OUTCOMES**

Key findings about integrating a benefits screening tool into clinical care:

a) The tool is most successful when a dedicated staff member follows up with patients after use

b) Staff such as patient navigators and nurses are better placed to support use of the tool than physicians

c) Integration of a new tool into clinic workflow requires additional supports and resources to see ongoing use with clients

d) Tailoring the information output was helpful, but only a first step in an often complex application process

e) Future studies will compare outcomes between the tool plus follow-up with providers versus the tool alone

**ONLINE BENEFITS SCREENING TOOL:**

**TOOL OUTPUT:**

**PROJECT FEASIBILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Patients and providers felt the "Get Your Benefits" online tool was useful and made an important step for addressing income insecurity. The tool distills complex volumes of information into an accessible format for providers and patients, with an online platform that can incorporate updates and changes easily. Patient and provider feedback will inform further improvements so clinicians will see increased capacity to intervene on a critical social determinant of health in their daily practice.

**NEXT STEPS**

The next phase will involve a participatory approach focused on establishing Integrated Research Teams. Patients with lived experience, community agencies, health providers, researchers and policy makers will play a critical role in providing input to existing studies and initiatives, with the goal of informing local and regional priorities, future interventions and patient-centred outcomes.

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**Team Members**

**Community Partners**

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