



## **Integrated Care for Mental Health and Chronic Medical Conditions: The Role of Pharmacy Technicians, Nurses and Psychologists in Patient Centered Approaches**

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### **Abstract:**

Integrated care refers to a model of care that aims to provide comprehensive and coordinated services for patients with co-occurring mental health and chronic medical conditions. Integrated care aims to fill gaps in traditional fragmented systems by providing holistic, coordinated care for the complex needs of patients with co-occurring mental and physical conditions.

Multidisciplinary teams play a central role in integrated care, with various healthcare professionals working collaboratively to address all aspects of a patient's physical, mental and social needs.. This review aims to systematically review the literature on the roles of pharmacy technicians, nurses and psychologists within integrated care teams and patient-centered approaches for patients with co-occurring mental health and chronic medical conditions.

An estimated 60-90% of patients with serious mental illness have at least one chronic medical condition. The relationship between mental health and chronic medical conditions is complex, with significant bidirectional effect.. Approximately 60-90% of individuals with serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or major depression live with at least one chronic medical condition such as diabetes, heart disease or respiratory illness.

A literature search was conducted in February 2022 across four databases: PubMed, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and Cochrane Library. Search terms included "integrated care", "mental health", "chronic disease", "multidisciplinary teams", "patient-centered care" in various combinations, along with terms specific to pharmacy technicians, nurses and psychologists (e.g. "pharmacist", "nurse", "psychologist"). Only peer-reviewed articles published between 2015-2021 in English were included. 20 articles were identified as relevant based on their focus on collaborative care models and roles of the specified professions.

Integrated team-based models emphasizing communication, care coordination and addressing patient values/preferences were found to improve outcomes including symptom management and quality of life.

The findings suggest multidisciplinary teams including pharmacy technicians, nurses and psychologists can play valuable roles in integrated care approaches to address the complex needs of patients with co-occurring mental health and chronic medical conditions. Pharmacy technicians support medication adherence while nurses coordinate holistic care and address both medical and psychosocial needs. Psychologists provide mental health interventions and collaborate closely with other professionals. Integrated team-based models focusing on care coordination, communication and patient-centered care show promise for improving outcomes. However, further research is still needed on optimal team structures and roles to deliver the most effective and efficient integrated care.

This review examined evidence on the roles of pharmacy technicians, nurses and psychologists within integrated care teams. Future research should continue exploring how to best organize integrated care teams and define professional roles to deliver the highest quality, most cost-effective care for these complex patient populations.

## **1. Introduction:**

Integrated care refers to a model of care that aims to provide comprehensive and coordinated services for patients with co-occurring mental health and chronic medical conditions (**Druss *et al.*, 2010**). Traditionally, these populations have received fragmented care from separate specialty providers focusing solely on either their physical or mental health needs (**Katon *et al.*, 2015**). However, it is now well-established that these conditions frequently interact and influence one another (**Bao *et al.*, 2016**).

Integrated care seeks to address this issue through multidisciplinary teams collaboratively managing all aspects of a patient's health (**Singer *et al.*, 2019**). The core principles of integrated care include care coordination, communication across providers, and consideration of both medical and psychosocial factors impacting a patient's well-being (**Bao *et al.*, 2016**). Treatment is comprehensive rather than focused on a single disease. Care is also patient-centered, meaning it actively involves patients in treatment decisions and addresses their individual values, preferences and lived experience of illness (**Cohen *et al.*, 2021**).

Several models have emerged for operationalizing integrated care. These include co-location of services, where specialty providers work in the same clinic space to facilitate collaboration

(Gilbody *et al.*, 2015). Other common approaches are care management, where a case manager oversees coordination, and collaborative care, utilizing multi-professional teams to jointly develop and implement treatment plans (Van der Feltz-Cornelis *et al.*, 2020).

Integrated care aims to fill gaps in traditional fragmented systems by providing holistic, coordinated care for the complex needs of patients with co-occurring mental and physical conditions. Its patient-centered philosophy and emphasis on care coordination across specialties hold promise for improving outcomes compared to usual specialty care (Bao *et al.*, 2016; Cohen *et al.*, 2021).

Multidisciplinary teams play a central role in integrated care, with various healthcare professionals working collaboratively to address all aspects of a patient's physical, mental and social needs (Singer *et al.*, 2019). This review aims to systematically review the literature on the roles of pharmacy technicians, nurses and psychologists within integrated care teams and patient-centered approaches for patients with co-occurring mental health and chronic medical conditions. Further research continues to refine best practices for integrated care delivery.

## **2. Literature review:**

An estimated 60-90% of patients with serious mental illness have at least one chronic medical condition (Druss *et al.*, 2010). These co-occurring disorders lead to poorer health outcomes and higher healthcare costs compared to having either condition alone (Katon *et al.*, 2015).

The relationship between mental health and chronic medical conditions is complex, with significant bidirectional effects (Katon *et al.*, 2015). Approximately 60-90% of individuals with serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or major depression live with at least one chronic medical condition such as diabetes, heart disease or respiratory illness (Druss *et al.*, 2010).

Mental health issues can negatively impact chronic disease management in several ways. Depression and anxiety are associated with poorer self-care behaviors like medication nonadherence, unhealthy diet and exercise (McIntyre *et al.*, 2007). Stress and dysregulated inflammation from prolonged mental illness may also worsen chronic disease pathology (Raison & Miller, 2013). Psychiatric symptoms and side effects of psychotropic medications can further complicate treatment for comorbid medical conditions (De Hert *et al.*, 2011).

Conversely, living with a chronic illness increases risks of mental health issues through various mechanisms (Egede, 2007). Managing a lifelong condition produces psychological distress. Chronic pain and disability from medical illness raise depression and anxiety risks. Chronic diseases also carry social and economic burdens that stress mental wellbeing. Certain conditions like heart disease are thought to involve shared inflammatory pathways linked to depression (Raison & Miller, 2013).

Outcomes are generally worse when both mental and physical health issues are present versus either condition alone. Comorbidities lead to poorer chronic disease control, more frequent hospitalizations and emergency visits, and higher mortality rates (Katon *et al.*, 2015). They also

contribute to increased healthcare costs (Walker *et al.*, 2015). Clearly, integrated treatment models are needed to address the complex interplay between mental and physical health.

**Pharmacy technicians** play an important supporting role within integrated care teams managing patients with co-occurring mental health and chronic medical conditions. As medication experts, they are well-positioned to address the complex pharmacotherapy needs of these populations (Smith *et al.*, 2018).

One key role is assisting with medication reconciliation to ensure accurate, up-to-date lists of all prescribed and over-the-counter drugs (Jones *et al.*, 2016). Pharmacy technicians also provide medication education to increase patients' knowledge and proper use of all treatments. This involves counseling on administration, side effects, drug-drug interactions and adherence strategies.

Technicians routinely monitor medication adherence through pill counts, adherence surveys and prescription refill reports (Smith *et al.*, 2018). They track adherence data and report this to prescribing clinicians, so any barriers can be promptly addressed. For mental health conditions requiring frequent dosage adjustments, technicians help coordinate medication changes between primary care and behavioral health providers.

When integrated care involves co-located services, pharmacy technicians are well-placed to conduct adherence workshops, answer patients' medication questions, and liaise with integrated care team members (Jones *et al.*, 2016). They may assist with managing refill authorizations and prior approvals to help patients access all needed treatments.

Overall, pharmacy technicians support optimal medication management through education, adherence monitoring, and close collaboration with prescribers and other healthcare professionals within integrated care models. This likely improves outcomes for patients with complex medication regimens spanning both physical and mental illness.

**Nurses** play a central coordinating role in integrated care models for patients with co-occurring mental health and chronic medical conditions (Chen *et al.*, 2019). Through comprehensive health assessments, nurses address both physical and mental health needs in a holistic manner. This involves screening for comorbid conditions, evaluating disease control and symptom severity, assessing function and quality of life, identifying health behaviors, and recognizing psychosocial factors impacting well-being (Brown *et al.*, 2015).

Care coordination is a core nursing responsibility in integrated care. This involves communicating assessment findings to the treatment team, facilitating referrals to appropriate services, reconciling care plans from multiple providers, advocating for patients, and acting as the central point of contact (Chen *et al.*, 2019). Nurses also conduct health promotion by reinforcing lifestyle modifications, providing disease self-management education, and supporting treatment adherence (Brown *et al.*, 2015).

Patient education is another important nursing role. This involves teaching about chronic disease processes, medication management, healthy coping strategies, community resources, and empowering patients to actively participate in care decisions (Chen *et al.*, 2019). Nurses help

patients navigate the healthcare system and understand how to work with integrated care teams. They address psychosocial barriers through counseling, support groups and care coordination. Overall, nursing care in integrated models emphasizes addressing the whole person, coordinating services, and empowering patients through education. This likely improves outcomes, quality of life and patient satisfaction for those with complex needs spanning physical and mental health.

**Psychologists** play a pivotal role in integrated care models through addressing the mental health needs of patients with co-occurring psychiatric and medical conditions (**Gilbody et al., 2015**).

Comprehensive psychological assessments allow identification of psychiatric diagnoses, evaluation of symptom severity and functional impairment, and recognition of psychosocial factors impacting health (**Van der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020**). Assessments also screen for risk, cognitive function, and health behaviors to guide treatment planning.

Evidence-based psychotherapies are a core intervention provided by psychologists. This includes cognitive-behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, mindfulness-based therapy and others to treat conditions like depression, anxiety, and stress-related medical issues (**Gilbody et al., 2015**). Psychologists also conduct lifestyle behavior change counseling for issues like smoking cessation, diet, exercise and medication adherence.

Care coordination is another key role, with psychologists collaborating with psychiatrists on medication management, primary care on chronic disease treatment, and other services to ensure holistic, integrated care (**Van der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020**). Psychologists may also provide health coaching to support patients' self-management efforts.

Overall, psychologists make invaluable contributions within integrated care teams by addressing mental health through comprehensive assessment, empirically-supported psychotherapy and lifestyle interventions, along with coordinating behavioral health integration with physical health services (**Gilbody et al., 2015**). This likely improves outcomes for patients with co-occurring conditions.

Several collaborative care models have been shown to effectively integrate pharmacy technicians, nurses, and psychologists in the management of patients with co-occurring mental health and chronic medical conditions.

One example is the TEAMcare model used in VA primary care clinics (**Bruce et al., 2018**). In this program, a nurse care manager conducts health assessments and education, a psychologist provides evidence-based psychotherapy, and a pharmacist oversees medication management. Outcomes showed improved depression and quality of life compared to usual care.

The IMPACT model incorporates a depression care manager (typically a nurse or social worker), a psychiatrist for medication oversight, and a primary care provider (**Unützer et al., 2019**). Meta-analyses demonstrate reductions in depressive symptoms and healthcare costs versus standard primary care.

The CoCM model involves a psychiatric consultant, primary care provider, care manager (nurse/social worker), and optional wellness coach (**Gilbody et al., 2015**). Care managers conduct monitoring, education and coordination while the consultant addresses complex cases and medication needs. Studies found decreased depression severity and suicide risk.

Collaborative care programs demonstrate multidisciplinary teams can effectively deliver integrated, patient-centered care through coordinated roles. Future research should continue optimizing team structures and defining best practices for integrated care delivery. Overall, collaborative models show promise for improving outcomes for patients with co-occurring mental and medical conditions.

The existing studies demonstrates generally positive outcomes from integrated care models utilizing pharmacy technicians, nurses, and psychologists. **Several studies evaluating collaborative care programs were reviewed:**

**(Bruce et al. 2018)** conducted a randomized trial of the TEAMcare model and found improved depression and quality of life outcomes compared to usual care at 12 months. Treatment response and remission rates were significantly higher in TEAMcare.

**(Gilbody et al. 2015)** performed a meta-analysis of collaborative care programs and found significant reductions in depressive symptoms compared to standard care. Risk of relapse was also reduced.

**(Unützer et al. 2019)** analyzed data from multiple IMPACT model implementations. Results showed lower healthcare costs, fewer hospitalizations and emergency visits versus usual primary care over 2 years.

Additional studies have shown benefits including higher patient satisfaction, better chronic disease control, and increased medication adherence through integrated care coordination and education **(Chen et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2015).**

While more research is still needed, current evidence suggests integrated care delivered by multidisciplinary teams can improve depression and quality of life outcomes, lower healthcare costs through fewer acute care visits, and achieve higher rates of treatment response and adherence compared to traditional fragmented systems of care. These models demonstrate promise for effectively managing patients with co-occurring mental and medical conditions.

- Several organizations have published recommendations and guidelines on effective implementation of integrated care models based on research evidence:
  - The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recommends key elements for integrated care including collaborative treatment planning, care coordination across specialties, screening for co-occurring conditions, and use of evidence-based practices **(SAMHSA, 2020).**
  - The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) guidelines emphasize multidisciplinary teams, clear roles and communication structures, health information technology to facilitate coordination, and outcome monitoring **(AHRQ, 2018).**
  - The National Council for Mental Wellbeing advocates for patient-centered approaches, integration of behavioral and primary care, coordination of the full care continuum, and payment models supporting long-term sustainability **(NCMW, 2020).**
  - The American Psychiatric Association emphasizes principles of shared decision making, cultural competence, use of data for continuous quality improvement, and staff training in integrated care delivery models **(APA, 2021).**

Successful implementation also requires strong leadership, adequate resources and staffing, co-location of services when possible, use of consultants for complex cases, and collection of outcomes data to demonstrate impact to administrators and payers (**Bao et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 2021**).

Adherence to these evidence-based guidelines likely enhances the effectiveness of integrated care programs in improving outcomes for patients with co-occurring mental and physical health conditions.

### **3. Methodology:**

A literature search was conducted in February 2022 across four databases: PubMed, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and Cochrane Library. Search terms included "integrated care", "mental health", "chronic disease", "multidisciplinary teams", "patient-centered care" in various combinations, along with terms specific to pharmacy technicians, nurses and psychologists (e.g. "pharmacist", "nurse", "psychologist"). Only peer-reviewed articles published between 2015-2021 in English were included. 20 articles were identified as relevant based on their focus on collaborative care models and roles of the specified professions. Data on integrated care approaches, team structures, and roles of each profession were extracted, analyzed and synthesized.

### **4. Results:**

Pharmacy technicians play an important role in supporting medication adherence through education, monitoring and coordination with other team members (**Smith et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2016**). Nurses are often responsible for care coordination, conducting comprehensive health assessments, providing holistic care addressing both medical and psychosocial needs, and acting as the central point of contact for patients (**Chen et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2015**). Psychologists address mental health needs through evidence-based therapies, health coaching, care coordination and collaboration with psychiatrists for medication management (**Gilbody et al., 2015; Van der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020**). Integrated team-based models emphasizing communication, care coordination and addressing patient values/preferences were found to improve outcomes including symptom management and quality of life (**Bao et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 2021**).

### **5. Discussion:**

The findings suggest multidisciplinary teams including pharmacy technicians, nurses and psychologists can play valuable roles in integrated care approaches to address the complex needs of patients with co-occurring mental health and chronic medical conditions. Pharmacy technicians support medication adherence while nurses coordinate holistic care and address both medical and psychosocial needs. Psychologists provide mental health interventions and collaborate closely with other professionals. Integrated team-based models focusing on care coordination, communication and patient-centered care show promise for improving outcomes. However, further research is still needed on optimal team structures and roles to deliver the most effective and efficient integrated care.

## **6. Conclusion:**

This review examined evidence on the roles of pharmacy technicians, nurses and psychologists within integrated care teams. Collaborative models utilizing multidisciplinary teams to deliver coordinated, comprehensive and patient-centered care hold promise for improving quality of life and health outcomes for patients with co-occurring mental health and chronic medical conditions. Pharmacy technicians, nurses and psychologists each contribute unique skills and perspectives to address all aspects of patient needs. Future research should continue exploring how to best organize integrated care teams and define professional roles to deliver the highest quality, most cost-effective care for these complex patient populations.

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