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The Healer Education Assessment and Referral (HEAR) Program During COVID-19

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In response to a series of physician suicides, the UC San Diego Health (UCSDH) HEAR Program was born in 2009. Originally geared towards the prevention of suicide specifically in physicians, the program was expanded in 2015 to include nurses and other healthcare employees. Although suicide prevention remains HEAR's main priority, it also focuses on wellness enhancement and burnout prevention using three key strategies. First, proactive outreach via an anonymous, web-based interactive screening and referral program connects the employee with licensed mental health workers. HEAR sends out invitations to take the screening to each UCSDH healthcare worker once a year. Secondly, education for the healthcare community with a focus on self-care, destigmatizing mental health treatment, and providing information about available resources. Finally, the HEAR program supports and cares for UCSDH caregivers through critical incident debriefings and group and individual support interventions.

Early in the pandemic, it became apparent that COVID-19 was going to have a drastic impact on the mental health of healthcare employees. This was emphasized by the suicide of Dr. Lorna Breen, an emergency medicine physician, in April 2020. Dr. Breen was working in New York amid the overwhelming initial surge, contracted COVID-19 herself, and experienced a level of overwork and despondency she had never been through before. Burnout, depression, anxiety, and

suicide have become increasingly well-known risks to working in healthcare. Moral injury, increased workloads, and constantly changing information during the pandemic magnified these pre-existing issues and emphasized the importance of providing mental health support to healthcare workers.

Physicians, nurses, and other allied health professionals are at greater risk of suicide and burnout than the general population. They are amazing at taking care of their patients, patient families, and their own loved ones but can develop a level of burnout that is difficult to heal, especially during an ongoing pandemic. The HEAR Program helps healthcare workers navigate the emotional toll caused by COVID-19 by acknowledging the trauma of working in healthcare during a pandemic, providing them with immediate support and connection to referrals to address mental health concerns, and ultimately prevent suicides.

HEAR's strategy to provide mental health care during COVID-19 included more frequent proactive outreach via the Interactive Screening Program (ISP), an anonymous screening service run by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Whereas individual groups (nurses, faculty, trainees, etc.) are usually proactively screened once per year, invitations were sent out every six months and fliers with the website information were posted throughout the hospitals. HEAR provided more education about burnout, depression, anxiety, resilience, and caring for oneself during COVID, while the program increased its debriefing service through the Care for the Caregiver program. Weekly staff debriefs were held as



Courtney Sanchez, LCSW has a master's degree in social work and has worked as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker for UC San Diego Health since she graduated 6 years ago. She started her career working for the seriously mentally ill and active-duty military populations in Outpatient Psychiatric Services before moving to the Healer Education Assessment and Referral (HEAR) Program. She believes that while COVID-19 has been one of the most trying times healthcare has ever gone through, it has also forced everyone to reevaluate their priorities and relationships in a very meaningful way.

well as unit specific debriefs. HEAR provided one-on-one consultations for all faculty and staff who requested further support through their department.

The need for support was immediate. HEAR had spent three years developing relationships within residency training programs, nursing teams, and other departments (chaplaincy, social work, etc.) so people would know who to go to in times of need. When COVID-19 hit, there



Rachael Accardi, LMFT has a master's in Marriage and Family Therapy and is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. She has worked at UCSDH for eight years, and started as therapist for individuals and couples at UCSDH Family Medicine and then transitioned to UCSDH's HEAR Program. She is a HEAR program counselor and takes a trauma-informed approach to care. She holds immense gratitude to those who have allowed her to walk alongside them during some of the most perilous and emotionally burdensome times of their lives. If COVID-19 has shown us anything, it is the importance of remembering mental health is health.

were not enough hours in the day to care to meet the demand for mental health services. Simultaneously, we were trying to prevent burnout within the HEAR program itself because we are not impervious to the stress of the pandemic. It took clear communication, strong boundaries, and a healthy dose of resiliency for the staff of two employees to care for the entire health system.

As a result of providing these services throughout the pandemic, we learned that the stigma of seeking help as a healthcare worker has improved. Increasingly, we note that people will reach out for help if they know where to go. Having an established team is crucial to navigating a crisis. We are deeply humbled to provide care during one of the most trying times of many of our lives. We have watched in awe as many of our colleagues provide compassionate care with determination and grit, despite emotional pain and suffering. We can only hope that the emotional first aid we have provided has been supportive and meaningful.

The HEAR program can be sustained post-pandemic but will need more financial support to meet the increased demand for services. The demand for services rapidly increased in

March 2020 and has only continued to grow. We are continuing to proactively screen all health employees, perform research, and advocate for the funding necessary to maintain these critical services. The program received a grant from the UCSD Sanford Institute for Empathy and Compassion and has been able to hire two temporary part-time counselors with the goal of bringing on more full-time staff to meet the demand for these crucial services. HEAR was just awarded the Schwartz Center National Compassionate Caregiver of the Year Award, and we are hoping to use this recognition to draw more attention to the need for mental health support for healthcare workers.

Please know the HEAR Program is available to all UCSDH employees. We hope you begin to reflect upon your own experience in healthcare, both before the pandemic and since. Should you need anything, we encourage you to reach out to us. Our goal is to connect with anyone who is struggling through these impossible conditions, and we want to help. We can be reached at wellbeing@ucsd.edu, or via our website: hear.ucsd.edu.

SPOTLIGHT ON CARING

UCSDH Walk of Thanks

By Abby Edilloran, BSN, RN, SCRNP
3F & 5H Neuro ICU/PCU, Assistant Nurse Manager

One early morning in April 2020, UCSDH team members at the La Jolla campus were greeted with uplifting signs across the parking lot wall. The Campus Point Drive parking lot wall was plastered with posters decorated with words of encouragement for not only doctors and nurses, but also for every other department that plays a crucial role in sustaining the amazing patient care we give every day: respiratory therapy, information services, environmental services, lab, social work, clinical care partners, rehab therapy, and more.

These signs were created in secret by 3F Neuro ICU nurse, Lauren Hoyos

and her close friends, who were inspired to create positive signs of encouragement for our frontline team members. It took a while for us to discover the artist who created and hung these signs but we later found out that Lauren was behind this sneaky, thoughtful gesture. To many of those that work with Lauren, this was not a surprise. Lauren is often found going above and beyond to bring light and joy to her co-workers and to her patients.

