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Oncology Distress Screening with Students Linking Patients to Resources

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Background

Distress Screening and Standards

- Distress screening is an essential component of comprehensive cancer care
- American College of Surgeons requires distress screening for voluntary accreditation
- This requirement functions as an unfunded mandate

Supportive Care Needs Survey (SCNS) at the UCSF Cancer Center

- UCSF implemented an EHR-based distress survey tool (SCNS) in 2016
- SCNS distress screening identifies psychosocial needs (distress, anxiety, depression)

Role of Patient Support Corps (PSC)

- Four-year co-op internship with UC Berkeley, SFSU, UCLA undergraduates
- Work on special projects, surge/backlogs, innovations
- UCSF designed and implemented distress screening and triage/escalation for interns
- PSC interns earn academic credit and/or stipend

Purpose

Special Distress Screening Outreach project

- Student interns message eligible patients via portal (MyChart) with link to distress survey
- Interns also message or call patients reporting moderate distress
- Interns refer patients to resources or escalate to social workers

Study Objective

To evaluate program reach of a cancer patient distress screening workflow that trains student interns to deliver surveys, screen responses, conduct patient follow up calls, and refer patients to resources

Intervention

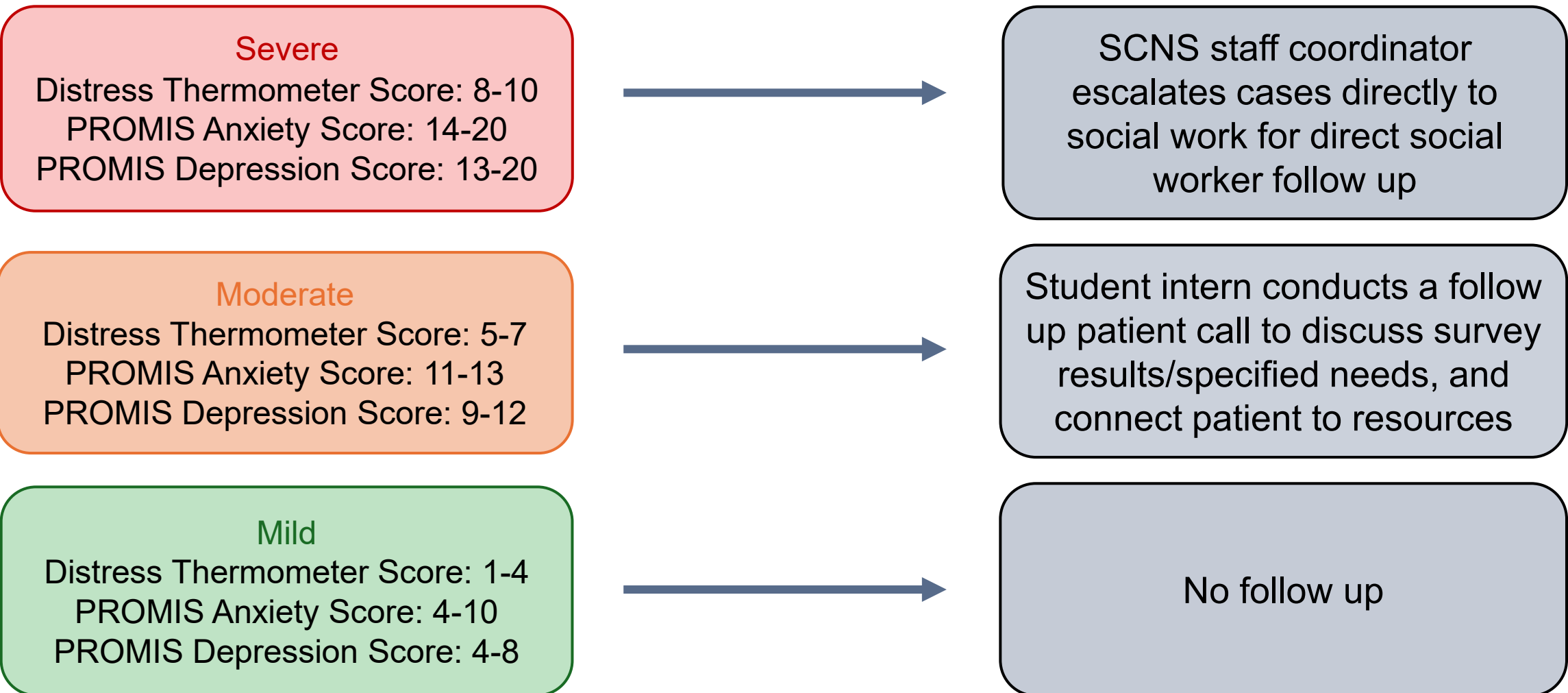
PSC trains students to contact patients and connect them to resources. A staff coordinator supervises, overseen by the social work operations manager.

EHR based outreach workflow

- Student interns have weekly half-day shifts
- Review EHR report of patients with appointments across 14 cancer clinic
- Student interns sends up to 40 surveys/shift via patient portal with distress survey

EHR automatically calculates Distress, Anxiety, and Depression scores

Distress screening and determine triage route



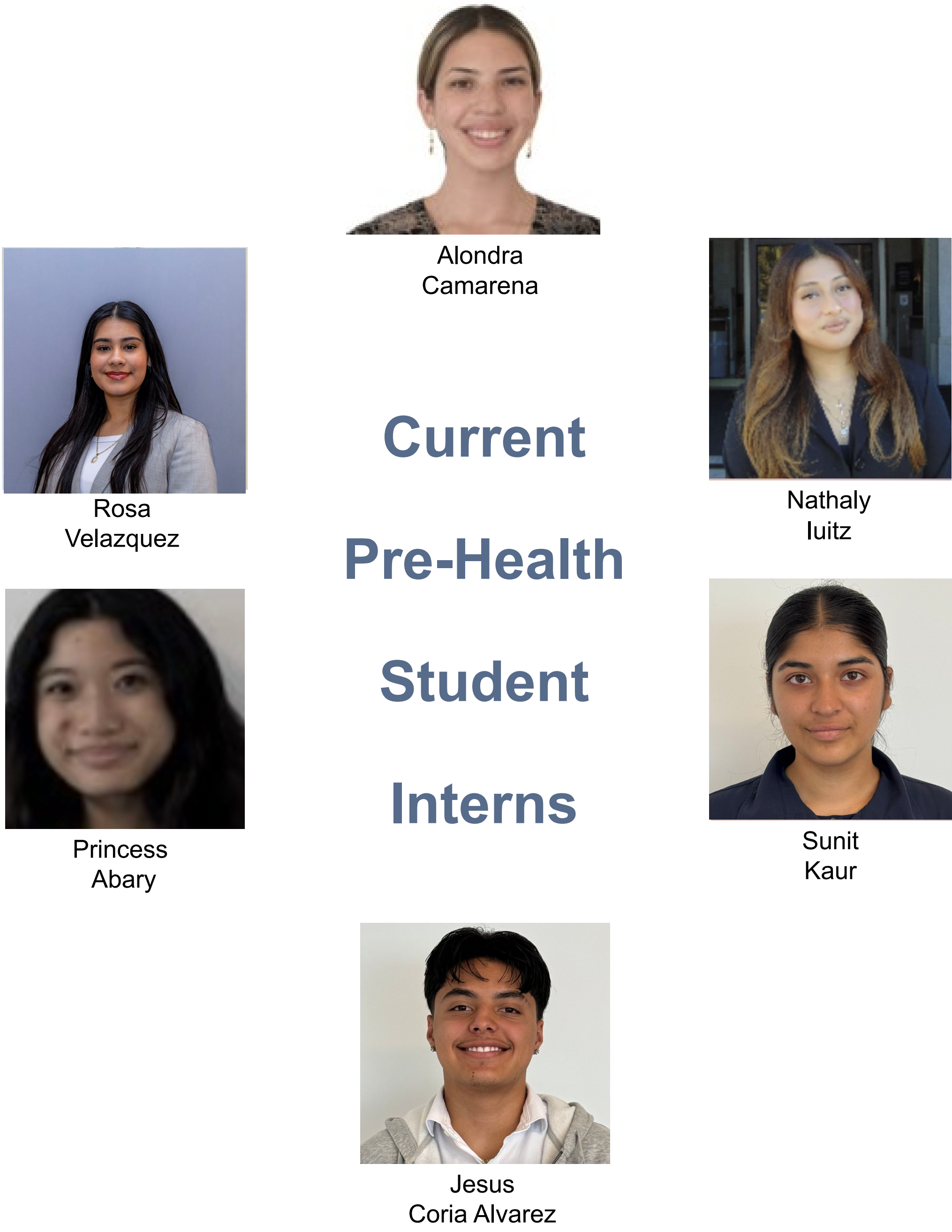
Student intern tasks

- Call patients to discuss survey responses and specific psychosocial needs
- Provide tailored resource letter to patients via the patient portal after triage call
- Escalate additional needs and referral requests to social work for further follow up
- Document interactions in electronic health record

Methods

Program Evaluation

- Conducted a structured audit of the program data
- Reviewed data from January 2025 - December 2025
- Tracked number/type of:
 - Surveys sent by student interns
 - Survey responses from patients
 - Follow up intern calls
 - Resources sent



Current

Pre-Health

Student

Interns

Pre-health student interns contacted 617 (90%)

of patients reporting moderate distress.

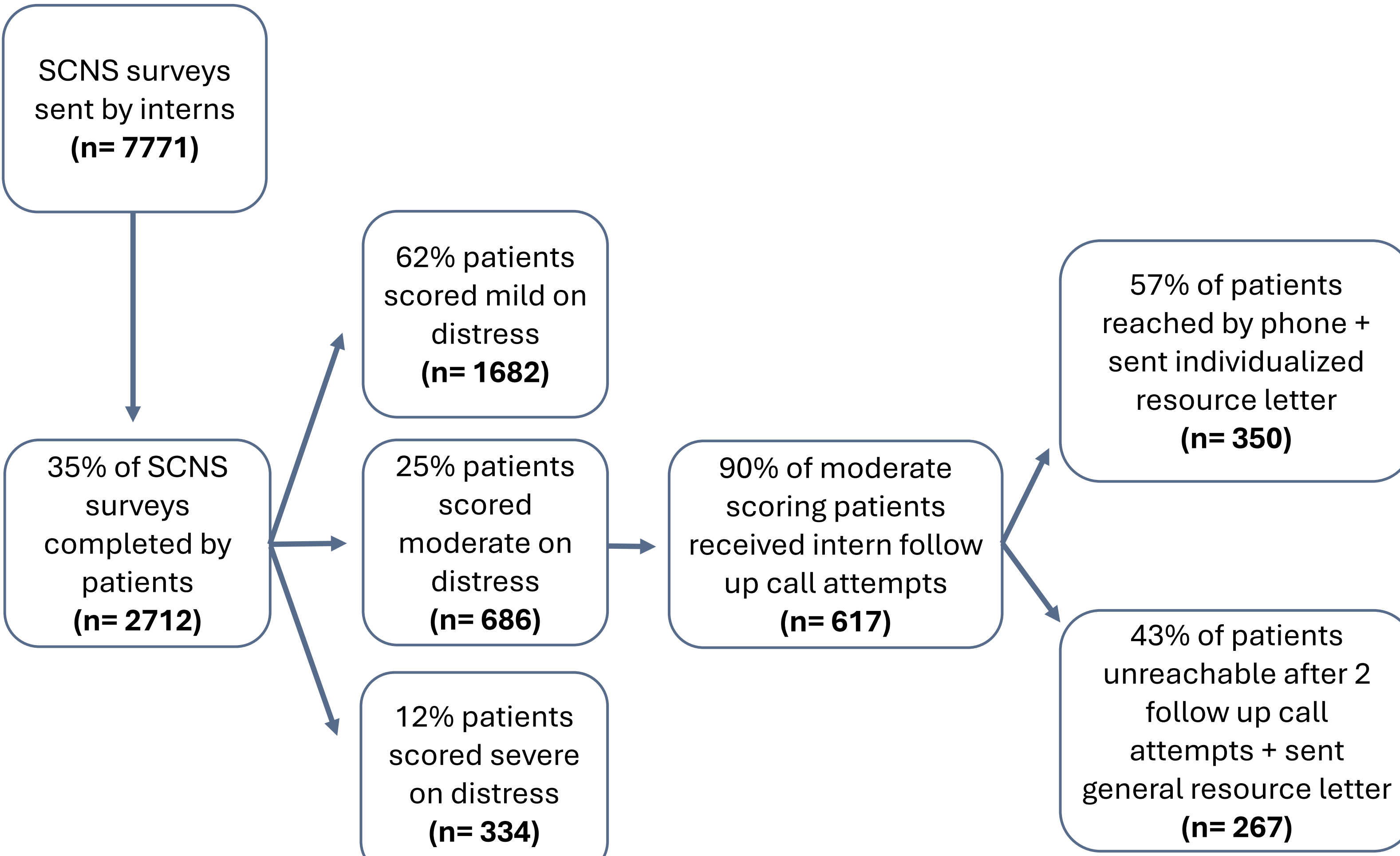
Interns provided personalized resources to 350 (57%)

and general resources to 267 (43%) moderately

distressed patients.



Results



Conclusions

Impact on Distress Screening

- Student interns are capable of administering distress screening surveys
- With appropriate escalation pathways, interns can triage moderate scoring patients
- Student interns can also connect and refer patients to appropriate resources

Impact on Patients

- Patients benefit from survey follow up and attention to psychosocial concerns
- Student interns can identify and escalate insurance delays, transportation, other issues

Impact on Student Interns

- Student interns help UCSF maintain an important voluntary quality accreditation
- Student interns benefit educationally as they advance towards health careers

Student Intern Reflections

Communication: Students learn to balance clinical structure with emotional presence

"I realized that following the script isn't always enough. Patients need empathy in the moment, not just structured questions."

Patient Centered Adaptability: Students develops skills in meeting patients where they are, rather than a one-size-fits-all

"Patients appreciate when you understand what resources they already have, it builds trust before the call."

Systems-based Practice: Navigating insurance issues, communication gaps, escalations, and resource coordination

"A patient shared distress about provider delays given the urgency of their treatment. Escalating the concern facilitated follow-up and reassured the patient".

Professionalism: Students learn to navigate empathy and clinical responsibility in complex situations

"I wanted to comfort the patient after their loss, but I learned that sometimes the most appropriate response is to give space and respect where they are emotionally."