Treatment for alcohol and drug use disorders in the 21st Century

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National consensus standards for addiction treatment in healthcare organizations, changes in federal legislation, and advocacy from the ONDCP create a unique opportunity to change the organization and delivery of treatment for substance use disorders. The Affordable Care Act may add millions of individuals to state Medicaid plans including many with alcohol and drug use disorders and access to care for substance use disorders may improve because addiction treatment is an essential benefit. Treatment for alcohol and drug use disorders is evolving from specialty clinics that only treat addictions toward integrated systems of care networked with patient centered primary care medical homes.

Oregon’s 16 Coordinated Care Organizations integrate physical and behavioral health care in a single point of accountability (a patient centered primary care home) to increase access to care, control healthcare costs and improve health outcomes. Global budgets and shared savings promote quality of care rather than quantity of care. Medicaid resources, previously separated for behavioral health and primary care services, are merged. Integration with primary care promotes access to and utilization of services for alcohol and drug use disorders. Assertive preventive and disease management services enhance use of primary care and reduce use of emergency and inpatient services. Oregon has an opportunity to build an addiction treatment system for the 21st Century.

In the 21st Century, health plans aggressively

- Screen for alcohol, drug and mental health disorders
- Provide patient education and brief interventions as needed
- Refer for intensive outpatient care when necessary
- Staff services with multi-disciplinary teams and licensed practitioners
- Use medications to minimize withdrawal cravings and support early recovery
- Treat substance use disorders as chronic conditions medically managed over prolonged periods of time to reduce the need for repeated acute care interventions and detoxification services
- Encourage and support recovery coaches to provide ongoing support for recovery
- Limit residential treatment to patients with the most severe levels of disorder

The Oregon Health Authority supports system transformation using Innovator Agents and encouraging integrated care. CCO metrics monitor the number and proportion of members screened for alcohol and drug use disorders. Additional analyses track access to care, retention in care, use of detoxification and residential services and impacts on utilization of emergency departments and inpatient days. Pharmaceutical databases can assess the proportion of patients receiving FDA approved medications for treatment of alcohol and drug use disorders. Now is the moment to help addiction treatment services in Oregon transition into primary care settings and mature as fully integrated components of healthcare.