Project ECHO MHSU Interior Health: Supporting Primary Care Practitioners in Areas Affected by 2017 Wildfires

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Background
Project ECHO MHSU Interior Health began as a pilot project in 2018-2019 to mentor Primary Care Practitioners (PCPs) working in areas affected by the 2017 wildfires. PCPs in these areas identified challenges in providing support to clients across the age continuum with complex mental health and substance use (MHSU) disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression, PTSD), particularly after a natural disaster.

After a successful 9-session pilot, the ECHO approach was further utilized in 2020-2021 to deliver a further 17 sessions.

What is ECHO?
Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) is a case-based education model for improving healthcare quality in primary care settings and bridging knowledge gaps between specialists and PCPs. This virtual model was originally developed to support rural and remote healthcare providers. Project ECHO has been used to address over 100 medical conditions world-wide.

The ECHO Model
ECHO connects PCPs with a "hub" of specialists (e.g., psychiatrists, nurses, etc.) through interactive sessions using the ZOOM platform.

This process of knowledge-sharing and mentorship enables rural/remote PCPs to provide clinical care previously outside their areas of expertise.

A distributed hub model of specialists and inter-professional teams in Interior Health (IH) offered 3 cycles of 5 to 6 bi-weekly sessions on the treatment of MHSU disorders. Recruitment was focused on PCPs practicing in rural, wildfire-affected communities in IH. Sessions included:
- A brief didactic presentation
- Case presentation by a PCP
- Group discussion of the case facilitated by a panel of specialists.

Sessions & Reach
A total of 17 ECHO sessions were offered from January 2020 to March 2021. There were 3 cycles (adult, child & youth, older adult) with the addition of 2 pop-up ECHO sessions addressing medical staff wellness (not considered in statistics).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle</th>
<th>Topic Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Suicide Risk Assessment &amp; Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child &amp; Youth</td>
<td>Trauma &amp; Substance Use in Adolescents (9 years old +)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pop-Up (On Demand)</td>
<td>Medical Staff Wellness during COVID-19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Older Adult</td>
<td>Managing Behavioural Emergencies in Older Adults in Primary Care</td>
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Overall, each session was attended by an average of 22 clinicians and 12 guests. Thirteen of the PCPs who attended each session were from 2017 wildfire-affected areas. Attendees participated in an average of 3 sessions.

Healthcare Provider Evaluations
- 97% Reported high levels of satisfaction from ECHO sessions.
- 95% Noted that ECHO sessions expanded their existing skills and knowledge.
- 89% Identified a decrease in professional isolation as a result of participating in ECHO.
- 71% Indicated that they were motivated to change their practice following participation in ECHO.

Barriers & Limitations
Despite overall success, some PCPs reported a lack of time to attend sessions and a lack of access to and familiarity with resources or services introduced by ECHO sessions.

Conclusion
Project ECHO MHSU demonstrated a strong desire for learning in a virtual community of practice. The results showed increased collegiality, decreased professional isolation, and appreciation for the dissemination of evidence-based guidelines. The ECHO model proved to be a feasible way to build capacity among PCPs providing care for patients with MHSU disorders in underserviced and rural areas of Interior Health.

Overall, these results suggest that Project ECHO is a promising and acceptable model for supporting knowledge transfer and empowerment of the rural primary care workforce, enhancing access to specialists for mental health and substance use disorders while growing local expertise in an affordable, practical, and sustainable manner.

References
3. UNM Health Sciences Centre (n.d.) Project ECHO: Right knowledge. Right place. Right time. Interior Health Authority.

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