Health Psychology: What Will the Future Bring?

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This commentary highlights several important themes and trends in this series of articles focusing on the future of health psychology. First, the challenges posed by changes in populations will only be met if health psychologists can develop a contextual competency. Second, with increasing evidence for the efficacy of health psychology interventions comes heightened interest in testing the effectiveness of these interventions. Third, issues of cost-effectiveness of health psychology will become increasingly important. Fourth, the growing integration of technological advances (e.g., telehealth, the Internet) into health psychology has major implications. Finally, the numerous changes outlined in this series of articles will demand that health psychologists extend and refine their theoretical models including the biopsychosocial model.

Key words: health psychology, psychosocial interventions, cost-effectiveness, contextual competency, telehealth

As the 25th anniversary of Division 38 (Health Psychology) approaches, it is appropriate to look back at past accomplishments and look forward to the future of health psychology. This series of articles highlights important future directions that health psychologists might take the field. We are delighted to have the opportunity to comment on these articles in Health Psychology, a journal that, over the previous 21 years, has emerged as one of the premier journals in its field.

In reviewing the accomplishments of health psychology research, Smith, Orleans, and Jenkins (2004) did a good job of highlighting some of the radical changes that are needed to effectively implement changes in education, research, and practice. We believe that, without such radical change, health psychology research and practice might be left behind. One example is the pressing need for health psychologists to become more involved in the area of behavioral genetics. It is increasingly clear that genetic background may be an important individual difference factor that can affect clinical outcomes. As this area matures, it is likely that information about genetic factors will be used in tailoring behavioral interventions. Health psychologists need to be aware of and involved in such efforts. Health psychologists are already involved in the development of new technologies for health assessment and the delivery of psychosocial interventions, which will be extended into the area of genetics.

Nicassio, Meyerowitz, and Kerns (2004) highlighted the empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of health psychology interventions. Although many of these interventions have been shown to improve symptoms and quality of life, there remains a paucity of data showing that behavioral and psychological interventions can influence disease outcomes. An additional problem is that many of these empirically supported interventions have not been widely incorporated into routine clinical practice. Part of the reason for this is that most studies have tested protocols delivered by highly trained and specialized research personnel and in carefully selected patient populations. There is a clear need for effectiveness studies that test the effects of health psychology protocols when they are delivered by practicing clinicians working with more typical clinical populations. It is quite possible that these empirically supported interventions have different effects in different patient subgroups. There is already evidence women and minorities respond differently to interventions that have proven to be effective in white males.

Tovian (2004) introduced the possibility that psychologists become primary health care providers and thereby serve as gatekeepers to the health care system. Although we believe that this is not likely to be adopted, the suggestion recognizes the contribution that mental health plays in patients with physical disease. In addition, Tovian suggested that there may be a surplus of psychologists and that reducing admissions to graduate programs may increase or retain health psychologists' value to the field of health care. However, this suggestion may also have a number of unintended and potentially undesirable consequences, particularly at a time when health psychology is emerging as a more important force in the health research and practice. We believe there is a need for a critical mass of health psychology faculty and students to meet the challenges outlined in the articles in this series. Furthermore, as nonpsychologists become increasingly interested in the research on health psychology and behavioral medicine, diminished numbers of psychologists involved in research activities could place health psychology at a disadvantage in competing for research dollars.

A key point raised by Saab et al. (2004) is the need to carefully consider ethical and legal concerns when implementing telehealth interventions. We believe that, because of the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association, psychologists are uniquely attuned to such issues and have much to offer in terms of
tailoring protocols as to be sensitive to problems such as confidentiality, information security, protocol guidelines, and licensure concerns. Particularly timely is the suggestion by Saab et al. (2003) that health psychologists establish a knowledge base concerning the effects of tissue donation on donor’s physical and emotional well-being. At many institutions, psychologists already have a prominent role in evaluating potential recipients of organ transplants, yet there are limited data about what factors are associated with successful outcomes. There also are a number of important ethical issues that are raised when the demands for organs are high but the availability of suitable organs is limited. Psychologists have much to offer in these discussions, and we anticipate that psychologists will have a significant role alongside medical specialists, surgeons, social workers, nurses, nurse practitioners, and medical ethicists.

Yali and Revenson (2004) maintained that health psychologists need to anchor research in culture and context. Although we agree with this in principle, it is difficult to develop rigorous methodologies that address this issue in a meaningful and rigorous fashion. Although survey content can be modified to be responsive to culture and context, such changes fall short of a truly novel and innovative approach to this problem. Recruitment and retention of research participants are significant problems. As health psychologists become more involved in clinical trials, it is important that they use their expertise to ensure that women and minorities who are enrolled into a study be retained. Health psychologists played a key role in recruitment and retention in the recent ENRICHD (enhancing recovery in coronary heart disease) trial, in which 40% of the participants were women and 33% were minorities (ENRICHD Investigators, 2001). However, even with the resources of this multi-institutional clinical trial, recruitment and retention were challenging. Among minorities, there remains a distrust of the research enterprise and a concern that the individual’s rights may be violated. Health psychologists need to help identify barriers to research participation among minorities and tailor their recruitment, treatment, and retention methods to overcome these barriers.

Suls and Rothman (2004) recognized the role that the biopsychosocial model has provided in advancing the field of health psychology, as well as psychosomatic medicine. Even though this model was initially directed at internists as well as psychiatrists, it has had an enormous impact on the discipline of health psychology. We believe this model legitimized the study of psychosocial factors in the development and course of disease and provided a conceptual basis for the notion that psychosocial interventions might be important in the management and treatment of patients with physical disease.

One can draw several conclusions from this interesting series of articles. First, health psychology has developed rapidly over its first 25 years and is now an established field. Second, health psychologists are at the forefront of many new research and clinical frontiers and, as a result, are well poised to make important future contributions. Finally, it is clear that health psychologists need to develop and utilize new skills. The emergence of health psychology training programs over the previous 10 years is an important development. These training programs need to be nurtured and sustained because it is only by training new generations of health psychologists that the challenges posed by the future will be effectively met.

References


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