

ULTRA Takes Off!!

Sixty practices from New Jersey and Pennsylvania have been enrolled in project ULTRA, "Using Learning Teams for Reflective Adaptation," since this past April. The practices are diverse in almost every way-size, location, and patient population.

This National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute sponsored study represents an opportunity for practices to participate in an innovative systems approach to improving patient care. This new approach involves an in depth assessment of each practice followed by a collaborative intervention with you and your staff. The practice assessment is carried out by a trained facilitator who will use observation and interview techniques. This comprehensive 2 week assessment is utilized as a starting point for a practice quality improvement team that works over 12-18 months on achieving measurable improvements in patient care systems and health outcomes. The quality improvement team includes clinicians, staff, and patients from the practice and is guided by the facilitator.

Although practice performance for the management of hypertension, diabetes and asthma, and screening for hyperlipidemia and smoking will be used to test the effectiveness of the intervention, this approach seeks to develop the practice into a learning organization by improving the processes for information sharing, communication, and decision making. This is very different from the more disease-oriented strategies advocated by many specialty societies. By improving the "health of your practice" we expect improvement in the quality of care for your patients with chronic diseases.

The study is led by Benjamin Crabtree, Ph.D., a nationally known researcher in primary care practice improvement. The team also includes John Scott, M.D., Ph.D. and John Orzano, M.D., M.P.H., family physician researchers who each bring twenty years of private practice experience to the project. Most practices shared a universal response of nervousness about incorporating a weekly meeting into their already busy schedules. Yet, after a few sessions any discomfort of practice members has ameliorated and reports from practices indicate that the meetings are helpful, even transforming. As one physician noted, "The ULTRA project did not interfere with ongoing patient care at all, and has helped to engage patients, and office staff, who were not previously interested in the improvement of office processes. It has empowered them to help effect change." After using the initial RAP cycle to work on communication issues, one physician noted that RAP "laid the foundation for ongoing directed change at specific clinical care processes... [it] would have been difficult to be successful at implementing specific disease management processes without this foundation." Another practice leader reported that the RAP process "gave me a picture of the practice that I hadn't wanted to face. It has been helpful in organizing meetings... and working on transforming office processes." While another leader found that he had been grossly underestimating the volume of incoming phone calls before the RAP team investigated patient access and satisfaction.

The ULTRA research team has been honored, and a bit humbled, by the relationships we are developing with those participating in this project. We would like to thank you for your commitment to practice improvement! Control practices...thank you for your patience! The research team has been working on perfecting the intervention and in 18 months you will receive the new and improved version! Meanwhile, our team would like to explore creative ways to facilitate "learning collaboratives" so that practices can share their experiences with each other.

If you would like to share ideas for the "learning collaboratives" or if you would like to contact the ULTRA team please contact John Orzano .