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Boosting Senior Stability

Town & Country Opens New SBHU for Patients 55 and Older

During the 2010 holiday season, Town & Country Hospital in Tampa opened a new Senior Behavioral Health Unit (SBHU) designed to provide a safe and secure oasis for short-term treatment of patients age 55 and older who are experiencing a behavioral health crisis that cannot be managed in an outpatient setting. The SBHU has been a welcomed relief for families of senior patients dealing with complex issues that often cause older adults to fall into a behavioral health crisis.

Ashit Vijapura, MD, medical director for the New SBHU at Town & Country Hospital, answers questions about its recent opening.

What facilitated the opening of this new unit?

Several factors led to the vision of developing and bringing to fruition the new SBHU, including the longer life span of the population and evidence of a growing need to address unrecognized psychiatric illness in older persons.

Based on research by Stephen J. Bartels, MD, medical director of the New Hampshire Division of Behavioral Health, and president of the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry, one in five older persons suffers from a diagnosable psychiatric illness, and the number of persons age 65 and older with a psychiatric disorder will more than double in the coming decades. These disorders can substantially impair functioning and can result in unnecessary hospitalizations and nursing home placement, poorer health outcomes, and increased rates of mortality. For example, older persons who suffer from depression have worse outcomes after medical events—hip fractures, heart attacks, or cancer—and individuals who are 75 and older have a higher suicide rate of any age group.

How did you determine details of the new SBHU?

More and more senior-age individuals are mixed in with general adult facilities that aren't properly prepared with specialized staff or the accommodations to handle the different medical challenges and, many times, multiple mental and physical co-morbidities associated with the 55 and older population. The new SBHU has properly planned a program to address the special needs and requirements for that population.

Tell us about the SBHU's interdisciplinary team of mental health professionals and how the program elements work together.

Specially trained mental health nurses, social workers, and an activities director with other specialized programs within Town & Country's Skilled Nursing Unit and Addictions Recovery Unit can benefit a patient who is admitted to the hospital's SBHU. Town & Country is unique to offer these three specialized programs, which all complement each other under one roof.

Our SBHU holds a special license to be able to administer oxygen and IV fluids. No other dedicated senior behavioral/psych unit can provide this medical service in an inpatient hospital setting in Hillsborough or Pinellas counties.

Town & Country's Skilled Nursing Unit with the hospital is an added program to go hand in hand with the SBHU. In 2010, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services awarded the full-service skilled nursing facility was a 5-star quality rating, the highest rating you can receive by this government agency.

The hospital's Addictions Recovery Unit is another program that can complement the SBHU when appropriate for the treatment of substance abuse or abuse, which may include excessive drinking, using illegal drugs, taking prescribed drugs without the advice or supervision of a physician, or taking excessive amounts of over-the-counter drugs. Substance abuse or abuse can complicate the mental and physical health of individuals. Older adults are especially vulnerable because of bodily changes that take place as people age and other medical problems that may exist.

What senior behavioral health trends are noteworthy for Florida, and in particular the Tampa Bay area?

According to the Surgeon General's 2009 report

on mental health, up to 20 percent of adults over the age of 65 experience some type of mental disorder, yet researchers believe that more than 60 percent of those people needing mental health services go without. However, individuals with treatment generally respond well. The report goes on to say that Americans over the age of 65 have the highest rate of suicide of any age group. Statistically, this rate increases even more for white males and persons over the age of 85. Older adults who are single, widowed, or divorced are also at higher risk than those married. Some individuals may stop taking medications or may not eat because of a desire to fade away.

What led to your interest specializing in general psychiatry, geriatric psychiatry

and also addictionology?

Compassion for people, especially the elderly. Many times, they're misunderstood and misdiagnosed. All too often, older people with psychiatric illnesses fail to receive treatments and services they need. Family members are often left with the task of trying to sort it out. These are complicated areas to find one answer and solution. It's rewarding to help people find answers and better their quality of life.

What brought you to Tampa?

Personally, I like the area. The metropolitan area has easy access and there's a need to take care of the specialized psychiatric needs of the growing senior population.



Dr. Ashit Vijapura



Our Senior Behavioral Health Unit is located on the second floor of the hospital and is designed to help patients and their families address the complex issues that can cause older adults to fall into a behavioral health crisis. Our distinct unit is a secure unit offering short-term treatment to stabilize patients age 55 and over who are experiencing a crisis that cannot be managed in an outpatient setting. We have orchestrated a highly skilled and caring team to provide assessment and a treatment plan personally designed to treat and manage each individual patient.

We are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. For more information or to speak to one of our staff members, please call, 866.362.7335

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