

Mary Cutler, M.D.'s written testimony in support of HB1461 Behavioral Health Programs - Outpatient Mental Health Centers - Medical and Clinical Directors

A medical director provides leadership on medical practice and develops the policies and procedures for the clinical staff of an organization. In order to undertake such role, a medical director must have the depth and breadth of medical training that a physician receives. While nurse practitioners play an important role in our healthcare system, their training does not prepare them for the demands and responsibilities of a medical director.

In order to juxtapose the disparate levels of training a psychiatric physician with a nurse practitioner, consider the following.

- Medical school is a four-year education that includes 10,000-16,000 hours of clinical experience, during which students get training in numerous medical specialties. A critical part of this education is training in clinical management of medical patients. During a two-year nurse practitioner program, nurse practitioners can receive as little as 500 hours of clinical training that is frequently in a shadowing, and not clinical management, position.
- Following the four-year medical school training, psychiatrists specifically receive at least four years of a full-time dedicated clinical residency experience to be eligible for general board certification. Specialties such as child and adolescent psychiatry include two years of additional training with the specialty population. During psychiatry residency training, psychiatry residents have had exposure to almost every level of care and thus the full array of clinical acuity and are able to identify and manage psychopathology of varying degrees. Nurse practitioners do not complete residencies at all.
- Through the somatic training that is received in medical school and during the first year of psychiatry residency (internship), psychiatrists are able to understand the effect and impact of somatic conditions on behavioral health conditions.
- All psychiatrists learn how to practice longitudinal psychotherapy by seeing a patient for at least one entire year. This type of understanding of the role of psychotherapy in the management of behavioral health patients is impossible in a 500-hour clinical experience. A medical director of an outpatient mental health center should understand the role of both psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy in order to guide the care team in the most proper individualized treatment plan.

As a consequence of nurse practitioners acting as medical directors, our most vulnerable patients, those treated in OMHCs, will be treated in a facility managed by the least-trained practitioners. This would be in direct violation of the Mental Health Parity Act of 1996, as medical directors of all other types of medical facilities are required to be physicians. We need to do better for our patients.