Help-Seeking Behavior and Health Care Navigation by Bhutanese Refugees

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this study was to document barriers to care, help-seeking behaviors, and the impact of a community-based patient navigation intervention on patient activation levels among Bhutanese refugees in the U.S. Data sources comprised 35 intake and 34 post-intervention interviews with program participants, 14 intake and 14 post-intervention interviews with patient navigators, and 164 case notes. Textual data were analyzed using the constant comparison method. Patient activation level was assessed at both time points. Participants had limited English proficiency (97 %), limited literacy (69 %), and the lowest level of patient activation (69 %). Participants routinely experienced complex insurance access, coverage, and payment problems and had limited healthcare-related life skills. Help-seeking began within social networks, with high reliance on bilingual, literate family members perceived to have experience with “the system.” Help-seeking was not stigmatized and was instead consistent with societal norms valuing mutual assistance. Participants preferred helpers to act as proxies and required repeated social modeling by peers to gain confidence applying healthcare-related life skills. Following the intervention, only one-third reported the lowest level of patient activation (35 %) and one-third were highly activated (32 %). Bhutanese refugees overcome healthcare access barriers by seeking help from a network of support that begins within the community. Community health workers serving as patient navigators are readily sought out, and this approach is concordant with cultural expectations for mutual assistance. Community health workers serving immigrant groups should model healthcare-related life skills in addition to providing direct assistance.

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