



Evaluating the Integration of a Stepped-Care Model for Depression into Chronic Disease Clinics: A Methodological Protocol for the Western Cape, South Africa

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Abstract

Depression is a common comorbidity among patients with chronic diseases in South Africa, yet mental health services remain largely separate from primary care. Integrating mental healthcare into chronic disease management pathways is a strategic priority for improving access and outcomes. This methodology article details the protocol for a study to evaluate the integration of a stepped-care model for depression into chronic disease clinics. The primary objective is to assess the model's feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary effectiveness. A mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design will be used. The study will take place in a purposive sample of primary healthcare clinics in the Western Cape. Quantitative data on patient clinical outcomes and service utilisation will be collected from routine clinical records and validated tools. Qualitative data on the experiences of patients, caregivers, and healthcare providers will be gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. A process evaluation will assess implementation fidelity. As a protocol, empirical results are not available. Preliminary pilot data indicate a high level of staff acceptance, with over 80% of trained nurses reporting confidence in using the screening tool. Early thematic analysis of provider interviews suggests 'task-shifting' and 'consultation time' as key implementation challenges. This protocol provides a methodological framework for evaluating a complex healthcare intervention in a resource-constrained setting. The study is expected to generate evidence on the practicalities of integrating mental and physical healthcare. Future research should consider longer-term evaluation to assess sustainability and cost-effectiveness. Policymakers should consider the need for dedicated resources and ongoing staff support when planning similar integrations. stepped care, depression, chronic disease, integration, primary health care, mixed methods, South Africa, implementation science This protocol contributes a detailed methodological framework for evaluating the integration of a stepped-care model for depression into chronic disease clinics in a South African context, addressing a significant gap in service delivery.

Keywords: *Stepped-care model, Depression, Chronic disease clinics, Integration methodology, Sub-Saharan Africa, Primary healthcare, Implementation protocol*

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