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Mental Health Needs of Children, Youth on the Rise

Bethesda, Md. – Over the last several years, providers saw a marked increase in mental health diagnoses, use of psychiatric medications, and outpatient care for mental health conditions among the diverse population of children in the Military Health System (MHS), according to a new study published by researchers at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU). These findings suggest the mental health care needs of children and youth are increasing and more child health care providers may be needed in both the military and civilian health care system. The study, “Mental Health Trends in Military Pediatrics,” was published in *Psychiatric Services* on April 10.

Using a Military Health System database of patient records, the team of USU researchers retrospectively reviewed trends in mental health conditions, treatment, and psychiatric medication prescriptions from 2003 to 2015 in children ages 2 to 18. During that time, mental health care visits increased about 2 percent each year, and diagnosed mental health conditions increased 4 percent from about 9 percent in 2003, to 15.5 percent in 2015, according to the study. Use of psychiatric medications also increased from about 7 percent in 2003, to about 10 percent in 2015, and older children were most affected. However, use of psychiatric prescriptions did keep pace with the number of mental health diagnoses, suggesting an increase in use of these medications was likely due to increased diagnoses.

The greatest increase was in diagnoses for suicidal ideation, which rose by more than 20 percent a year, according to Dr. Elizabeth Hisle-Gorman, an associate professor of Pediatrics at USU.

“These increases did not appear to be directly related to a parent’s deployment, since we did not see spikes in children’s mental health diagnosis, care, or pharmaceutical treatment during periods of increased deployment,” Hisle-Gorman added. “Our findings were more pronounced in older children, suggesting it may be important to increase surveillance of this group.”

Since the Military Health System is a system of open access to care, and these trends were consistent with that of national trends, the researchers believe the rising trends are not related to access to care. However, the researchers believe these results may be related to increased mental health screening in children and adolescents, increased attention to mental health issues, or national efforts aimed at supporting primary care providers in the diagnosis and treatment of some child mental health conditions.

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