Improving Women's Body Literacy

United States
Annie Harvey

Project Summary

Elevator Pitch

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

The focus of this innovation is to provide education in achieving Body Literacy to reproductive-age women presenting to the health care system. Body Literacy is the self-knowledge gained by a woman's learning to observe and chart the cyclic signs of fertility and infertility, together with other health and wellness observations (http://www.justisse.ca/new/newsletters/Femme%20Winter%202006.pdf). Also termed “fertility awareness” or “reproductive health awareness” the use of charting has adherents within women's health research, holistic health care settings, Planned Parenthood, and religious organizations. Charting is currently recommended to evaluate infertility, heavy menstrual bleeding, polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and catamenial epilepsy. However, the menstrual cycle can also act as a vital sign to illuminate one's general (e.g., cardiac, bone, endocrine) health. As with routine breast self-exam, women familiar with their fertility signs are so aware of what is normal for themselves that they can help their clinician determine irregularities based on their individual symptoms rather than the average woman’s symptoms.

The primary beneficiaries are the young women and mothers who are significant users of health care services and make the majority of health care decisions. These women will be empowered by becoming more active participants in their reproductive health care through tracking their own body rhythms in the context of their daily lives. Body Literacy is economical, involving only the cost of training sessions and supplies; medical and drug costs used to achieve or prevent pregnancy can also be minimized. Body Literacy is accessible to virtually all reproductive-age women in whom cyclicity is not suppressed (e.g., by hormonal contraceptives). The routine use of Body Literacy in even indigent and illiterate populations has been tested and endorsed by the World Health Organization for family planning purposes.

About You

Location

Project Street Address
Project City
Project Province/State
Project Postal/Zip Code
Project Country

Your idea

Focus of activity
Service/process

Year the initiative began (yyyy)
2006

Positioning of your initiative on the mosaic diagram

Which of these barriers is the primary focus of your work?
Patients not empowered

Which of the principles is the primary focus of your work?
Democratize access

If you believe some other barrier or principle should be included in the mosaic, please describe it and how it would affect the positioning of your initiative in the mosaic:
This field has not been completed

Innovation

Define the innovation

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Context for Disruption:
The model for women's reproductive health has become largely medical and pharmaceutical or device oriented. Hormones are routinely prescribed as first-line treatments in order to enhance or prevent fertility or to treat other reproductive complaints. Prescribed hormones almost all act by full-scale suppression of the body's own endogenous hormone rhythms. In contrast, fertility awareness through Body Literacy helps women achieve an understanding of their hormonal cycles in order to recognize how desired results might be achieved by working within their hormonal milieu. Body Literacy provides an alternative or adjunct to expensive and invasive fertility procedures; allows a free, natural, and drug-free method of regulating pregnancy; and focuses on a vital sign of women's overall health that can inform decisions about medical care.

In the short term, improving Body Literacy will enhance the ability of women to understand their own body and how to "read" it to make better health care decisions. In the long term, evidence is expected to accumulate to support the importance of normal menstrual cycles and ovulation to cardiac and bone health and the utility of "Menses as the Fifth Vital Sign".

Delivery Model
Body Literacy can be taught to groups or to individuals in medical or social service settings. We propose a pilot study of group instruction (minimally 4 sessions over 3 months) by a health educator in one of our Family Medicine residency training clinics. The population served is largely inner-city, uninsured and contains a substantial proportion of single mothers. Reproductive-age women with spontaneous cycles would be solicited or referred from those presenting for treatment. We estimate that at least 30% of identified women would express willingness to learn Body Literacy, based on a population-based telephone survey of reproductive-age local women as well as surveys by others regarding willingness to learn about a "free, natural form of family planning". Based on our own experience with patients prescribed an educational (nutrition) program we expect that perhaps half would actually attend a class, and half of whom would continue through all 4 sessions.

Key Operational Partnerships
The model would be tested in the Via Christi Family Medicine residency program (Wichita, KS). The program's outpatient clinic has in excess of 13,000 reproductive-age female patient visits per year. Several residents have been trained in Natural Family Planning methods. Although this clinic provides a large population of underserved women who might profit from education in Body Literacy, and has staff who have demonstrated interest in using fertility awareness in their practice, there is little that would prevent expansion of a tested model to other medical sites.

Local support for charting will be provided by the Natural Family Planning office of the Wichita Diocese. This office, supported in part by Via Christi Health Care System, is composed of certified teachers, user couples, and religious dedicated to promoting, teaching, and supporting natural family planning in the Diocese. The presence of a large contingent of personnel trained in the methods of charting and their close relationship with our hospital system facilitates but is not required for the testing of our model.

Secularized training in charting will be provided by Justisse-Healthworks for Women (Edmonton, AB). The mission of Justisse is "To teach every woman how to independently observe, chart, and make sense of her menstrual cycle events." The term "Body Literacy" was coined by Justisse, who is one of the very few secular charting training resources available.

Impact

Financial Model
The cost of a preliminary study to assess the feasibility and utility of providing Body Literacy training to women will be composed of program initiation costs, videoconferencing and consulting with Justisse, and iterative program evaluation. A fully implemented program would require the one-time cost of training a health educator(s) (approximately $3,000) and recurrent costs of training participants and program evaluation, and is estimated at approximately $50 per woman [http://www.fertilityuk.org/nfps822.html]. Funding for a preliminary study is expected to be derived from grants, in-kind support (i.e., space; referrals) from the clinic, and other internal sources. An outcomes evaluation may reveal an economic benefit to achieving Body Literacy: perhaps better self-awareness and self-care will allow avoidance of some health problems and the costs we incur to serve the uninsured. Ultimately, the program could become self-sustaining by marketing Body Literacy classes to the wider public and through research grants.

What is your annual operating budget? $30,000

What are your current sources of revenue? (please list any sources that are foundation grants)
The annual operating budget of $30,000 represents an estimate of the cost of the preliminary study. Via Christi Health System (which owns the Via Christi Wichita Health Network) has revenue in excess of $1 billion. The Via Christi Wichita Health Network provides the financial support that allows Via Christi Research to enhance hospital outcomes and quality, provide Graduate Medical Education, and support medical staff initiatives. Financial support for specific projects has also come from the Via Christi Foundation.

Effectiveness
Training in Body Literacy for purposes of Natural Family Planning has been promoted by the Catholic Church for decades and studies including
some by the World Health Organization have supported its use worldwide as an efficacious form of birth control. Relatively fewer studies have examined efficacy in treating infertility or the general benefits of Body Literacy.

Which element of the program proved itself most effective?

Body Literacy training appeals to women who want "natural" and "drug-free, no side-effect" medical care.

Number of clients in the last year?

Locally, four separate volunteer organizations teach women Natural Family Planning at numerous sites in multiple classes available weekly. At least one physician and one resident physician have taken specialized out-of-state training in Natural Family Planning.

What is the potential demand?

A telephone survey using a probability design was administered to 307 randomly selected women in the local area. Four of ten women considered appealing the idea of using natural alternatives for the purposes of birth control or family planning. Women who wished to use Body Literacy would be eligible for the proposed method without the necessity of committing to the periodic abstinence of Natural Family Planning. A retention rate of 50% is expected of women attending an introductory session.

Scaling up Strategy

For preliminary study, we will evaluate the feasibility of teaching Body Literacy in one of our two Family Medicine clinics; identify patient barriers to engagement; and, determine whether participants increase their awareness and knowledge of their reproductive health, begin to chart on a regular basis, and use their own charts appropriately in their daily lives. The benefits of Body Literacy as described by patients will also be noted so that long-term outcomes can be addressed for targeted conditions (e.g., achieving or avoiding pregnancy; establishing regular cycles post-partum or post-oral contraceptive; PCOS; PMS) in terms of cost of services and medication use before and after the teaching intervention.

A successful preliminary program would result in expansion into our second Family Medicine clinic. Scaling up would require training of one or more health educator(s). Continuance of the program would be supported by opening Body Literacy training to the general public. As class sizes permit, specialized groups could be formed composed of women of similar age, educational status and rationale for charting.

Stage of the initiative:

0

Expansion plan:

Beginning with a single Family Medicine clinic, the program will be expanded first to a second Family Medicine clinic and then the general public or other social service sites (e.g., battered women's shelter).

Origin of the Initiative

Internationally, small groups of women interested in tracking their own reproductive health have been instrumental in promoting wider training in Body Literacy. Secularly-oriented training has been made available by Planned Parenthood in Alberta, CA, by general practice sites in the UK, and by the Family Planning Association of New Zealand, which receives government support.

Sustainability

What are your two main challenges to finance the growth of your initiative

The main challenge is demonstrating that (1) patients in our clinic would find such instruction of use and that (2) it would result in better health outcomes. Charting one's cycle is not perceived to be a priority in health care. Approximately $30,000 would be required to fund a proof of concept study.

How did you hear about this contest and what is your main incentive to participate?

I receive an e-mailed newsletter from Philanthropy News Digest. The contest provided a venue to crystallize my thoughts and obtain feedback from a wider audience.

The Story

Do you have an annual financial statement?

Via Christi Health Care System has an annual financial statement.

Do you currently have an annual financial statement that tracks profit/loss?

Via Christi Health Care System has an annual financial statement that tracks profit/loss.

Please describe the amount (and/or type) of funding you need to implement your initiative, at year 1 and at year 5.

Funding a preliminary study of 50 women learning Body Literacy would require approximately $30,000.

A fully implemented program serving 200 women annually would require approximately $11,000 per year, some of which could be recouped through charges.

Source URL: https://www.changemakers.com/disruptive/entries/improving-womens-body-literacy#comment-0