OHCA Behavioral Health Screener Development Project

Potential Benefits and Risks. All clinical procedures carry potential benefits and potential risks. Behavioral health screening is no exception. The key principle for using any clinical procedure is the appropriate balance of risks and benefits, with particular attention to two issues: 1) that the risks are reasonable in light of the potential benefits; and 2) that reasonable steps are taken to minimize risks.

What is Done in Behavioral Health Screening. Behavioral health screening involves patients in primary care settings completing a questionnaire that asks about common behavioral, mental health, emotional or substance abuse problems. The objective of the behavioral health screening questionnaire is not to make a diagnosis, and the information collected by the questionnaire is not sufficient for diagnostic purposes. The objective of screening is to alert the primary care provider to any areas of possible concern that might merit either additional clinical inquiry, monitoring, fuller assessment, treatment or referral to a behavioral health specialist.

What Are the Potential Benefits to Patients. Potential benefits of the procedure include improved identification of problems or conditions that might benefit from additional assessment and/or treatment, including problems and conditions that otherwise might go unidentified, unmonitored or untreated. Depending upon the condition, the potential benefits may be substantial. For example, identification of untreated attention problems in children may ultimately lead to improved functioning at school. Identification of depression or substance use problems may ultimately lead to a range of health benefits. Behavioral health conditions are common, but may not otherwise be asked about or raised as a concern during primary care visits. Because the questionnaire screens for suicide risk, in rare circumstances there could be potentially life-saving benefits.

What Are the Risks. Completing questionnaires like the Behavioral Health Screen are widely held to pose no greater than minimal risk to patients. Similar questionnaires have been used in clinical practice and research with very large numbers of patients. There is no known pattern of severe adverse events or reactions caused by these procedures. No clinical procedure is completely free of risk. Patients may feel uncomfortable completing the questionnaire or answering personal questions. There may be risk related to any unauthorized sharing of the information. There may be privacy risks related to others viewing a patient's answers.

What Can Be Done To Minimize These Risks. A number of steps are taken to minimize risks. First, the screening tool will be voluntary so that patients who may feel uncomfortable answering the questions can decline to do so, either in full or in part. Second, the tool includes an item indicating that the patient has unspecified concerns that they wish to discuss privately with their primary care provider. Third, training and instructions will encourage administering the questionnaire in reasonably private settings and guarding against the completed questionnaire being viewed apart from necessary job responsibilities. The tool is designed to be handled by the patient's primary care provider, primary care office personnel and to be part of the patient's regular primary care clinical record. As part of the clinical record, it will be subject to the same procedural protections that apply to all protected health information including HIPAA regulations. Patients in primary care normally are provided with information about the privacy of their protected health information.

Benefit-to-Risk Ratio. We believe that the potential benefits are substantial and the risks are no greater than minimal. Given this, we believe that potential benefits far outweigh risks.