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Improving Cardiac Health by Helping Patients Manage Stress

Valley's cardiovascular services team respectfully requests consideration of funding to support the services of a trained nurse specialist to provide mindfulness, meditation, and counseling services for patients in Valley's cardiovascular programs. Psychological factors like stress are avoidable issues that contribute significantly to physiological challenges for patients with a cardiac-related diagnosis, such as Atrial Fibrillation (AFib). The initiative, which has been implemented on a pilot basis, aims to treat the whole patient by addressing psychological factors that can significantly worsen physical symptoms.

Through this program, the part-time, certified clinical nurse specialist/mindfulness educator meets with patients by appointment in the hospital or in the physician practice and teaches skills for meditation and stress reduction. The specialist also spends time with family members, those awaiting surgery and treatments, and even staff who feel the heavy impacts of working with patients with serious conditions. In recent years, COVID-19 and the political climate have created an increased amount of stress for people, and patients who have existing or new heart conditions are at an increased risk.

During the pilot program, which began in 2024, the educator offered appointments two days per week, and his services were so popular that the schedule was fully booked on most days. The service addresses an unmet need in our region for this type of support, which reduces and possibly prevents physiological medical emergencies in patients. Funding would allow for an expansion of services to a broader spectrum of patients under the cardiovascular service line.

Background: The Electrophysiology team cares for patients with AFib, and stress can have a devastating impact on a patient's arrhythmia. Most arrhythmias are fueled and worsened by adrenaline, which increases when a patient is stressed. AFib is very dependent on how a patient feels, and stress is the strongest risk factor; even patients who undergo ablation surgery to address the condition are at risk of recurrence, heart attack, and cardiac arrest as a result of stress. Extensive scientific research shows that stress can have insurmountable impacts on a patient's health, and emotional stress and strain are associated with a variety of health problems, especially cardiac issues, creating significant barriers to the healing process. Through the practice of mindfulness techniques, patients can learn how to better cope with life's challenges and skillfully respond to stressful life situations. The mindfulness educator would provide patients (individuals and groups) with emotional support, motivational talk, and stress management training focusing on non-pharmacological therapeutic strategies to help patients navigate challenging situations, embrace their medical challenges, and move forward.