

Second generation psychologist makes reimbursement a priority at APA

The National Psychologist, July/August 2019, Vol 28(4), p 16

By Paula Hartman-Stein, Ph.D.

July 2nd marked the first anniversary of health psychologist, Jared L. Skillings, Ph.D. as chief of professional practice at APA, replacing Katharine Nordal, Ph.D.

The new strategic plan at APA restructured his position to be broader than overseeing the Practice Directorate and includes drawing upon and connecting with other areas in the association, such as science, education and public interest.

In a recent interview, Skillings said, "My first, second and third priorities in this position are all the same; that is, to create a laser focus on improving psychologists' reimbursement.

"Practice guidelines are important but my belief is if we can't help people make a living then we can write guidelines all day long and it won't matter. We have to make the profession a viable one so people will want to do this work."

A letter he sent in May to the administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Service (CMS) is an example of advocacy efforts on behalf of Medicare providers.

The four-page letter focused on the way Medicare reviews and audits are conducted for psychologists. He criticized the Comparative Billing Reports authorized by CMS in 2018, saying they failed as an educational tool. He said that psychologists who treat a larger number of Medicare patients are more likely to be subjected to Targeted Probe and Educate (TPE) pre-payment review merely because their billing practices differ from their peers.

He proposed five changes in the way Medicare reviews and audits are conducted for psychologists. For example, he said claims data should be reviewed by psychologists, not another type of provider. In TPE reviews nurses usually examine documentation and educate psychologists. At press time, APA had not received a response from CMS.

Skillings' focus on improving reimbursement for psychological practice likely originated from his family background. His father, Ralph Skillings, Ph.D., is a counseling psychologist who has had a solo private practice with his wife as office manager for over 40 years in the small Ohio city of Chillicothe, about an hour from Columbus.

Serving his community as a family psychologist, the senior Skillings bills under Medicaid, Medicare and other third party payers and continues to work in his private practice three days a week.

"I recall when my family had fluctuations in income because of changes affecting my Dad's billing. My parents didn't talk about details of cash flow, but I knew when times were lean."

Skillings is a family man in his own right. Married for 20 years to his wife Julie, who has a master's degree in school psychology, they have adopted five children, ages 6 to 11, including two biological sisters from Haiti. "Four of our children are people of color," he said.

Involvement in a community church that embraces diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds is important to Skillings and his wife. As an undergraduate, he attended Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio, a small university with Baptist affiliations.

His Midwest roots continued through graduate school, obtaining his master's and doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Toledo.

Skillings completed a health psychology internship and fellowship in health psychology and primary care. "I did not match with my first choice of internships and fell into health psychology backward," he said, getting his initial training in that specialty at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, Fla.

Immediately before taking the APA position, Skillings was a corporate behavioral health executive. For six years he served as chief of psychology at an accountable care organization (ACO), Spectrum Health, a \$6 billion enterprise with 12 hospitals and 200 out-patient offices based in Michigan. Skillings grew a small behavioral health program of five providers to a staff of 57 during his six years with the company.

Skillings is a black belt in Six Sigma Process Improvements, which is not a martial arts achievement, but rather an accreditation in a method developed by the Toyota Corporation for improving the quality and efficiency of work.

While working for Spectrum, Skillings treated a limited number of clinical cases, patients with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder and treatment-resistant depression. He also conducted pre-surgical exams for heart and lung transplant patients.

Prior to working at Spectrum Health, Skillings was a primary care psychologist at Wayne State University in Detroit and served for three years as director of behavioral medicine at Pine Rest, a large group practice in Grand Rapids.

To call Skillings a wunderkind is not an exaggeration, as he is the first early career psychologist to be board-certified in three specialties. He also served as president of the Michigan Psychological Association and held numerous positions on boards and committees within APA.

At the beginning of his first year at APA, Skillings witnessed the implementation of changes in structure and revaluing of psychological testing codes. During his watch in 2019 the Health and Behavior CPT codes were surveyed. The proposed rule for their revised work values are to be published in July with new reimbursement rates announced in November.

"If there are problems with their work values, we'll beat the door to Congress to change it," he said. "My greatest challenge in this job is to find ways to honor our history (i.e. not forgetting who we are), while positioning doctoral psychology practitioners as leaders in the rapidly-changing marketplace."

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