Impact of Mental Health Boarding on Clinicians at a Children's Hospital: A Qualitative Analysis

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The child and adolescent mental health boarding crisis (i.e., prolonged stays in acute care hospitals for patients awaiting mental health treatment) continues to challenge acute care hospital staff and resources. We sought to understand clinician's experiences while caring for patients experiencing mental health boarding. We conducted semistructured qualitative interviews with clinicians who care for patients experiencing mental health boarding in an acute care freestanding children's hospital with no inpatient psychiatric unit. We used an inductive approach to determine interview themes and major findings. The study included 48 clinician participants from diverse specialties, including 13 social workers, 11 nurses, five psychiatric technicians, six pediatric residents, four attending pediatric hospitalists, four attending psychiatrists, one psychologist, and four other mental health specialists. We identified emergent themes in five domains: (1) frustrations with the mental healthcare system, (2) lack of training in mental healthcare skills, (3) feelings of helplessness, (4) ineffectiveness of medical model of care during mental health boarding, and (5) resilience and support factors. Caring for patients with mental health boarding has negative effects on clinicians, and health system efforts to prevent boarding could improve workforce retention and reduce burnout.

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