

Portland Identification and Early Referral (PIER) Program Overview

Overview

The Portland Identification and Early Referral Program (PIER) is a treatment research program with the mission of reducing the incidence of psychotic illnesses (such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder) in the Greater Portland area. PIER began on December 1, 2000 with support from several local and national foundations, including the Center for Mental Health Services, the Maine Health Access Foundation and the State of Maine Department of Behavioral and Developmental Services. Subsequent awards by the National Institute of Mental Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation have provided continuing support.

PIER provides treatment, support and guidance at the very first sign of symptoms in young people between the ages of 12 and 25 who live in the Greater Portland area. Research shows that when the public, educators and health professionals have information about the early warning signs of psychosis, young people who are at risk get help early. Consequently, their chances greatly improve for staying in school, working, maintaining friendships and planning for the future. The PIER Program provides education and treatment for young people and their families, and conducts research about the effects of early identification and intervention of psychosis.

PIER is comprised of a team of highly trained and well-experienced mental health professionals available to residents of the Greater Portland area to:

- Educate and train the provider community, the school professional work force and other key professionals who encounter young persons in the early stages of deterioration toward psychosis. This effort extends to the education of the entire area population.
- Identify, and help others to identify, young people who are manifesting prodromal (early, pre-illness signs) or active symptoms and signs of schizophrenia and other major psychotic disorders.
- Evaluate individuals' risk for actual psychosis.
- Treat those who are at substantial risk with an empirically-tested package of psychosocial and psychopharmacological interventions.
- Maintain a long-term relationship with individuals and their families to assure the clinical and human support needed to achieve a full secondary prevention effect.

Community Education

The PIER staff works with the community to educate those who work with young people about the early warning signs of psychosis, the importance of getting help early and the benefits of early treatment. Education comes in a variety of formats: newspaper and movie theater ads; mailings to schools and families; and educational presentations to pediatricians, family practitioners, mental health professionals, educators, school special services staff, graduate students, professionals in training, high school health class students and parent groups. The PIER team continuously explores alternative ways to provide education to a broader audience in order to be more effective.

This three-phase program initially targeted health and educational professionals who work most closely with youth. The PIER team of mental health professionals reached out to physicians, schools and colleges, social workers, guidance counselors, school nurses, police and others likely to encounter young persons at risk for psychosis. The second phase involved educating the community. Through a public information campaign, PIER focused on reducing the stigma of mental illness by educating families, young people and the general population about early warning signs of psychosis. Phase three was the establishment of an assessment and treatment service that identified potential program participants and provided family intervention and education, along with medication therapy, as necessary. The PIER Program continues to provide community and professional outreach education in addition to their assessment and treatment services.

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Treatment Program

The PIER Program is staffed by a multidisciplinary team with special training in the area of early identification and treatment of psychosis. Young people who are showing the warning signs of a psychotic illness and their families are offered services once the young person has met criteria for inclusion in the program. Participants are assigned to one of two conditions:

- **a.** youth at high risk are offered the treatment program, which provides psychosocial interventions and medication (as indicated) with an emphasis on family psychoeducation and supported education and employment.
- or**
- **b.** youth who are found to be at low risk will be offered the control program, which offers careful monitoring for symptoms, case management, referral as requested by the young person, and crisis intervention if needed.

Research Background

The PIER Program is based on earlier studies conducted in the United Kingdom, Australia, United States and Scandinavia that focused on interrupting the very early progression of schizophrenia and other severe psychotic disorders. The goals of these studies were to improve outcomes and prevent the onset of the psychotic phase of these illnesses.

The experience of the PIER Program demonstrates that it is possible to intervene in and counteract the acute onset of major psychotic disorders. One major change that allows these effects to occur is the advent of clear premorbid indicators for the likely onset of psychosis. The other is the development of highly effective, yet relatively benign, psychosocial and drug treatments that can be tailored and used at dosage levels that do not subject young people and their families to unacceptable risks. This combination of family psychoeducational groups, supported education and employment and pharmacologic treatment, has a powerful effect on mediating the symptoms that place a young person at risk for the onset of psychosis. Under the direction of William McFarlane, MD, Director of the Center for Psychiatric Research at Maine Medical Center Research Institute/Spring Harbor Hospital, the PIER staff has more experience with systematic application of family psychoeducational intervention than any other medical center in the U.S.

In addition to the PIER Program's use of standard, empirically validated treatments, the critical feature of this approach is the educational outreach by a clinical team to general practitioners and pediatricians, guidance counselors and the population at large to educate and inform about the early signs of psychosis. This project is using state-of-the-art treatments in a new application: secondary prevention of psychosis in vulnerable individuals.

