Health Agencies Update

Federal Government Funds Center for Mental Health and Social Media

The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), is helping the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) establish a center focused on how social media affects the mental health of children and youths. The AAP may receive $2 million annually for 5 years for this new National Center of Excellence on Social Media and Mental Wellness.

"There are benefits to social media use, but there are clearly risks, too—especially when it comes to mental health," HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra, JD, said in a statement.

The center will focus on providing education, resources, and research updates on the effects of social media use in children and youths. It will also study clinical and social interventions to mitigate and prevent risks associated with social media use. Additionally, the center will provide culturally and linguistically appropriate guidance that focuses on enhancing mental health while reducing risks during social media use.

"The increasing number of young people diagnosed with anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions is concerning," HHS Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use and the leader of SAMHSA, Miriam Delphin-Rittmon, PhD, MS, said in the statement. "Prior research has indicated that social media may be harmful, particularly to children and young people. We expect this new center to shed light on this challenge and provide us with best practices and guide us in protecting young people."

New NIH Program for Artificial Intelligence in Research

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Common Fund unveiled a new program to increase use of artificial intelligence (AI) in biomedical and behavioral research. Pending the availability of funds, the NIH plans to invest $130 million in the new program over 4 years. This new initiative, called the Bridge to Artificial Intelligence (Bridge2AI), will unite collaborators from across various backgrounds and disciplines—including those from traditionally underrepresented groups in the sciences—to create data sets, tools, and best practices for AI analysis.

The emphasis on diverse research teams aims to prevent perpetuating inequities and ethical issues that often arise during data collection and analysis when using AI for behavioral and biomedical research. For example, related data sets are often incomplete because they don’t always include enough contextual information, such as collection conditions or unintentional biases that occur during data collection. When researchers don’t account for the social or ethical context in which data were obtained, AI may incorporate biases and inequities into analyses, which also affects training future AI technologies. Thus, Bridge2AI will develop ethical practices for data use with a focus on issues like privacy and bias reduction.

Bridge2AI researchers also will develop guidance and standards for creating ethically sourced data sets, and that data will be used to study human health. One goal, for example, is understanding how behavioral, environmental, and genetic factors may affect health and well-being.

"Generating high-quality ethically sourced data sets is crucial for enabling the use of next-generation AI technologies that transform how we do research," NIH Acting Director, Lawrence Tabak, DDS, PhD, said in a statement. "The solutions to long-standing challenges in human health are at our fingertips, and now is the time to connect researchers and AI technologies to tackle our most difficult research questions and ultimately help improve human health."

The NIH has already awarded funding to researchers at 6 institutions working on related projects. These endeavors include the development of tools to ensure that data sets are ethically sourced and that these sets abide by the FAIR principle to be findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable.

VA Guidebook on Long COVID

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) published a new guidebook on caring for veterans with long COVID. Titled the Whole Health System Approach to Long COVID, the guidebook provides information about signs, symptoms, and treatments for the illness. The guidebook also includes metrics, such as surveys, to assess autonomic symptoms.

"From the first day of the pandemic, VA’s clinicians and researchers have been on the front lines—saving lives and learning how to treat COVID-19 and long COVID," VA Secretary Denis McDonough, MSFS, said in a statement. "This guidebook packages up the best practices we’ve learned about treating long COVID, and it will help health care providers across America improve the lives of Veterans and non-Veterans alike."

The guidebook’s whole health approach can be implemented to personalize a plan that considers individual goals, needs, and values. Moreover, this approach may help clinicians assess and manage long COVID symptoms and subsequent conditions. Clinicians can also use the whole health approach to prioritize treatment based on patient needs. — Melissa Suran, PhD, MSJ

Note: Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.