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Note to our readers and advertisers: This is the last issue of California HealthFacts for 2021. Our next issue will publish on **Monday, January 10, 2022**. We wish you the happiest holiday season and a Happy New Year!

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Nursing

VIRTUAL REALITY TRANSPORTS FRONTLINE NURSES FROM THE COVID FLOOR TO PARADISE

By Carol Davis, HealthLeaders

A California hospital with a national reputation in virtual reality (VR) for pain, patient stress management, patient education, and maternal care has deployed that same technology to help its frontline nurses combat stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Nurses at Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian in Newport Beach, California, who experience high levels of stress, particularly from treating COVID-19 patients, began finding relief in March through CenteredVR, a virtual reality–based mindfulness and stress management program developed especially for them by BehaVR.

"We have seen the power of virtual reality–enabled programming to support the mental health and well-being of our patients, so it was a natural fit for us to offer [this] tool to our nurses," says Dr. Robert Louis, chief of neurosurgery, under whose leadership Hoag has become a leader in healthcare VR.

"Mindfulness practices are shown to reduce chronic stress, and CenteredVR combines those principles with the neurological and psychological power of virtual reality, offering our nurses new resources to reduce stress and improve their overall health," Louis says.

CenteredVR was developed in collaboration with Johns Hopkins Medicine, says Kim Mullen, MSN, RN, Hoag's director nursing professional development, research and Magnet program director.

"It guides users into a soothing, immersive VR environment that helps alleviate stress through educational elements and mindfulness practices," she says.

Over the course of six 20-minute sessions, which can be done in the privacy and comfort of their homes, nurses learn to become less reactive and more

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IN BRIEF

FULL COVERAGE: CALIFORNIA MEDICAL BOARD AND TROUBLED DOCTORS

- The Medical Board of California was established to protect patients by licensing doctors and investigating complaints when things go wrong. The board has a long history of going easy on troubled doctors, a *Times* investigation has found. Here's the full Los Angeles Times coverage. *(Los Angeles Times)*

KERN HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS HIGHLIGHT ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AS THEY PREPARE FOR FOURTH PANDEMIC SURGE

- Local healthcare leaders took stock of lessons learned so far during the pandemic as they brace for a fourth, possibly more virulent surge of COVID-19 cases expected to arrive in Kern in February or March. Representatives of Memorial Hospital, Clinica Sierra Vista, and the county's Public Health Services Department said during an online forum that staffing has been a particularly tough challenge that could have repercussions in the years ahead. But at the same time, technology and a new spirit of collaboration have brought improvements that may prove helpful over the long term. *(The Bakersfield Californian)*

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VIRTUAL REALITY

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resilient to stressors.

"You learn those mindfulness concepts by practicing and training your brain. You learn how to cope better and be more resilient versus go down that negative pathway in helping you cope with stress," Mullen says.

The VR kits are sent to each nurse's home. Including a headset, headphones, and remote control, each kit arrives in an appealing, scented box to conjure a relaxing, spa-like environment, Mullen says.

"It's all about the personal experience," Mullen says.

When Hoag introduced the CenteredVR program, nearly two-thirds of the nursing staff in the COVID-19 unit signed up to participate.

Crystal Watson, RN, initially was unsure about the VR technology.

"We've always had other ways of dealing with stress, but none that had a visual element, so I wasn't sure what to expect," she says.

But once she put on the goggles and plugged in her headphones, she was "floating high above the ocean like a bird," she says.

As Watson began to use CenteredVR regularly, her stress-induced headaches gradually subsided, she says.

Watson and other nurses can choose which session they want to experience based on the level of stress they are feeling, from options designed to target specific feelings of anxiousness, sadness, or hopelessness.

"I fell in love with the 'Body Scan' series," she says. "One minute I was on my couch stressing, the next minute I was watching a beautiful waterfall or meandering through a lush green forest."

Once she focused on the breathing exercises, tension in her neck and shoulders began to relax, she says.

Though many of Hoag's nurses use the technology to decompress, Watson often uses it before work to prepare her for the day ahead, so she can better handle the stressful challenges of a 12-hour shift, she says.

Early results on CenteredVR's impact on users' stress levels have been positive. Among the 70 nurses who have used the program to date, stress levels decreased, on average, by a reported 34%.

The hospital is also currently conducting a nursing research study to determine outcomes, Mullen says.

Further data has been gathered and submitted to the Institutional Review

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IN BRIEF

CAN VIRTUAL REALITY BE USED TO COMBAT RACIAL BIAS IN HEALTH CARE?

- Black patients overall are 22% less likely to be prescribed pain medication than White patients, according to an analysis of 20 years of research. These treatment disparities are often traced to bias among physicians, many of whom, research shows, falsely believe Black people feel less pain than White people. Now Taylor is leading the research team at UCSF to see whether virtual reality might play a part in reversing trends like these, testing the simulation to see whether it can raise awareness of medical mistreatment and mitigate unconscious bias among doctors and nurses. *(KQED)*

BLOOD SHORTAGE PROMPTS HOSPITALS TO PLAN FOR SURGERY CANCELLATIONS

- An ongoing blood shortage has some San Diego County hospitals nervous that they may soon need to start delaying surgeries due to lack of available units. Increased demand for blood, combined with pandemic-driven difficulties running blood drives and also getting the public to come out and participate, have left shelves empty of the red gold needed for everything from saving the lives of car accident victims to treating those with stomach ulcers. *(The San Diego Union-Tribune)*

VIRTUAL REALITY

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Board, Mullen says.

Nurse feedback has indicated that CenteredVR not only has decreased stress levels, but has helped dispel feelings of isolation and pain caused by stress and anxiety, Mullen says.

"They've said it's almost a getaway or escape, and you don't have to go anywhere," Mullen says.

Some, like Watson, say that VR has helped relieve chronic headaches, muscle tension, and anxiety.

"I always say, who wouldn't relax when you can lay and look at a beautiful waterfall and hear the sound, or walk through a beautiful, lush forest, or be at the beach?" Mullen says. "It's being able to travel when you can't."

Technology

NEW RPM PARTNERSHIP AIMS TO TEST MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENTS AT HOME

BY ERIC WICKLUND, HEALTHLEADERS

Two digital health companies are launching an ambitious remote patient monitoring program aimed at monitoring people with mental health concerns at home and developing new medications to help treat them.

Cerebral, a telehealth company focused on mental health services, is partnering with biotech company Alto Neurosciences on a "precision psychiatry" program that aims to improve how medications and other treatments are tested and developed for patients. The two plan to launch a series of home-based clinical trials next year that use telehealth and mHealth tools to monitor participants, then tailor new medications or treatments based on the data they receive.

"Our goal is to identify who is responsive to our investigational medicines to move quickly towards registration supportive studies," Adam Savitz, MD, PhD, chief medical officer of Los Altos, CA–based Alto Neuroscience, **said in a press release.** "Ultimately, this accelerates our ability to develop targeted medicines more efficiently and help patients get better faster. This partnership represents the beginning of upending the nature of mental health clinical trials moving forward as we work to better serve a greater breadth of patients at an unprecedented speed."

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EVENTS

JANUARY 5–8, 2022

CES 2022. This conference is where the sharpest innovators hit the stage. Produced by CTA, CES features every aspect of the tech sector. The conference is in Las Vegas with virtual options.

JANUARY 10–13, 2022

40th Annual J.P. Morgan Healthcare Conference. (Virtual.) A healthcare investment symposium, which connects global industry leaders, emerging fast-growth companies, and innovative technology creators and members of the investment community.

JANUARY 24–25, 2022

Healthcare Project Delivery Conference. Learn how providers are overcoming resource constraints to upgrade facilities and deliver new developments. This year's program focuses on how advancements in procurement, design, financing, and O&M can be applied to your next project.

MAY 10–13, 2022

National Association of Healthcare Access Management (NAHAM) 48th Annual Conference. This conference is for healthcare professionals regarding healthcare management and will be held at the Sheraton San Diego Hotel & Marina. The NAHAM is a professional organization dedicated to promoting excellence in the management of patient access services.

MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENTS

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"Delivering accessible, cutting-edge care is of utmost importance to us and we're proud to offer our members at-home access to clinical research," added David Mou, MD, MBA, chief medical officer of San Francisco–based Cerebral. "Working to match each member with the right medication for their unique biology is completely novel in psychiatry, and if successful, this precision approach will completely disrupt the current treatment paradigm in mental healthcare. As one of the largest mental health providers in the world, we look forward to bridging the gap between innovative drug discovery and commercial scalability in order to help millions suffering from mental illnesses."

The partnership takes advantage of the fast-growing RPM field, which healthcare organizations and companies have been embracing over the past few years in a bid to shift both healthcare and research out of the hospital, clinic and lab and into the home. The platform allows organizations to treat patients where they are and access a larger, decentralized pool of people for clinical tests.

Officials say the programs will enroll 200 to 300 participants from Cerebral's network and use a mobile electroencephalography (EEG) device to measure brain activity, as well as other wearables to monitor cognitive and emotional functions, sleep and activity and genetics. Virtual visits will also be scheduled with the participants before and after the trials.

The first trial, slated to begin in January 2022, will focus on people who have failed at least one prior treatment for major depressive disorder and will focus on the ALTO-300 drug developed by Alto Neurosciences. Subsequent studies will focus on other treatments and mental health concerns, such as PTSD.

"In addition to the brain biomarker evaluations, patients will also be assessed on clinical outcomes, such as depression or PTSD scales, to evaluate the overall improvements," officials said in the joint press release. "Alto will leverage their analytical approach to predicting patient outcomes to determine whether a certain biomarker best identifies patients who are most likely to benefit from the drug candidate being evaluated. The results from these studies are expected to inform the design and implementation of studies that will potentially support FDA approval of novel psychiatric medications and companion biomarker diagnostics."

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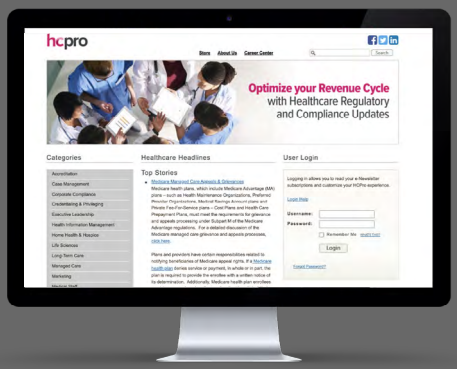
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