

Exploring the impact of ECHO Ontario Integrated Mental and Physical Health on participants’ approach and attitude towards the care of patients with complex needs

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OBJECTIVE

To examine how Project ECHO Integrated Mental and Physical Health (ECHO-IMPH), a virtual tele-education program, influences the attitudes and approaches of health care providers towards patients with co-occurring mental and physical health concerns.

METHODS

Participants were recruited from two cycles of ECHO-IMPH

Semi-structured interviews (N=22) were conducted by members of the research team

Demographic Characteristics	N (%)
Profession	
MD (family physician)	5 (22.7)
Nurse practitioner	5 (22.7)
Allied health professional	12 (54.6)
Practice setting	
Community health agency	4 (18.2)
Community primary care	10 (45.5)
Other	8 (36.3)

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and de-identified

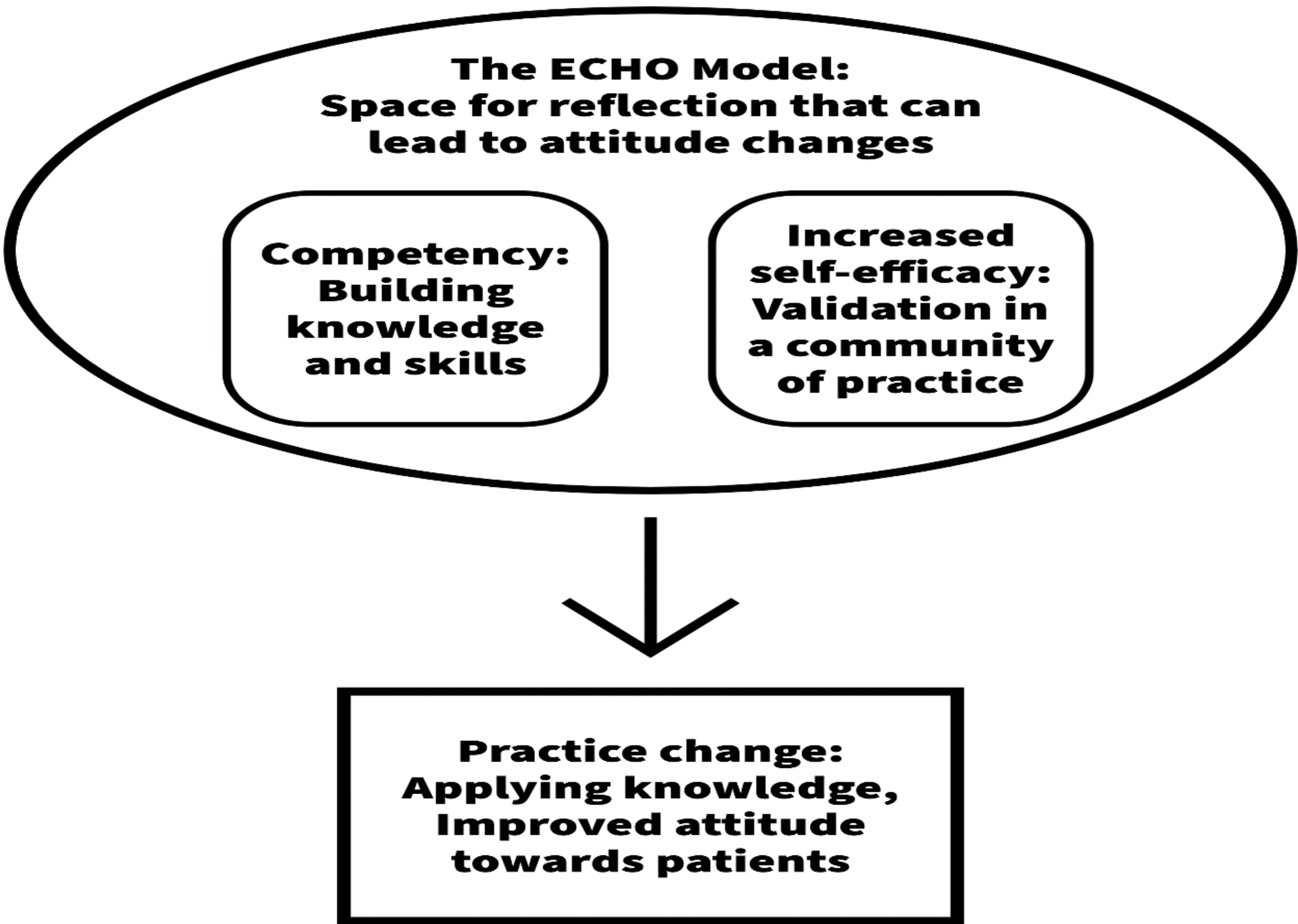
Transcripts were coded using the Braun & Clarke method for thematic analysis¹

Coding summaries were created and used to label and define meaningful themes

“I gained so much knowledge from the didactic sessions; each and every one of them was fantastic for increasing my knowledge base in one way or another... It was also based in the reality that we exist, not in some kind of academia that would be in ideal circumstances.”

“For patients [with personality disorders]...what's really not understood is that [a personality disorder] is actually a mental health condition... it's their mental health problem that makes them the way that they are... It made me a lot more I think compassionate and understanding.”

“I think this has really helped me identify more of why I might have a knowledge gap, or how I would approach a situation differently than the case presenter, which has been really eye-opening, because then it makes you think, you know, how can I do better?”



RESULTS

Three main themes were identified from the interview data:

Enhanced Knowledge and Skills: participants gained a deeper understanding of the interplay between mental and physical health, adopting a more integrated view of care and allowing them to view their patients through a more holistic lens.

Changes in Attitude and Approach: interviewees described how ECHO-IMPH shifted their attitude towards patients with complex needs, from frustration and fatigue to an empathic and patient-centered approach. These changes led to improved patient interactions.

Space for Reflection and Exploration: the ECHO model created safety and validation to support participants’ exploration and reflection of their attitudes and practice. Connecting with other healthcare providers normalized the difficulties participants face with patients with complex needs.

DISCUSSION

The ECHO model creates a safe space for critical reflection of previous practice, helping improve participants’ competence by building knowledge and skills, and increasing their self-efficacy. Reflections can lead to changes in previously held attitudes towards patients with complex needs which, when combined with new knowledge and skills, can create a change towards more patient-centered and evidence-based practice. Based on the shifts in attitude observed and the “disorienting dilemmas” described by some participants in their reflections, our findings suggest that there are elements of transformative learning inherent to the design of the ECHO model.^{2,3}