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An Innovative Approach to Food Insecurity in Medical Resident Clinics

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The first aim of our study was to better understand patient needs and awareness of local resources. The second aim of this study was to develop a tool within the electronic medical record to screen for food insecurity and provide resources during clinic visits. For our first aim we performed a needs-based qualitative assessment through semi-structured telephone interviews with patients in our outpatient internal medicine residency clinic (N=13). For our second aim, we created a tool in our electronic medical record that provides data on the prevalence of food insecurity and prompts providers to share resources. Resource options include an on-site food pantry for emergency food, list of local food banks, and social work referral. These resources will be directly available on the after-visit summary for each food-insecure patient. Many patients normalized food insecurity and did not identify it as a significant problem until directly questioned. Affected patients frequently reported running out of food and food stamps by the end of the month. Out of the 13 patients surveyed, 7 stated that they purchase food only once per month. These findings underscore the need to identify patients who face food insecurity through routine screening. In order to address lack of access to healthy food in our patient population, we developed an accessible food pantry within our residency clinic. We are currently screening patients in our clinic and providing them with emergency food and contact information for local food shelters. Future directions for this project include working with local food banks to arrange a sustainable food supply for the pantry and assessing metrics of physical health in food insecure patients. By providing our affected patients reliable access to healthy food, we aim to address one of the many barriers to patient adherence to physician dietary recommendations. We hope this in-clinic food pantry can be adopted in outpatient primary care and resident clinics throughout the country as an effective approach to food insecurity.