Patient Health Questionnaire two-item scale (PHQ-2 screening tool)

Depression is considered one of the most prevalent disorders with far-reaching consequences in America. This led the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force in 2002 to recommend screening all adults for depression. According to 2014 statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau Center for Disease Control and Prevention report, 5.4% of the American population suffers from depression. More than 18 million people are affected by depressive disorders yet 80% of these individuals are not receiving treatment. Depression costs employers over $51 billion dollars in lost revenue. Depression is projected to become the second leading contributor to global burden of disease by 2020 according to the World Health Organization.

Mood disorders are a significant reason our Medicaid recipients seek services in higher levels of care. Mood disorders are the top diagnosis of members in inpatient psychiatric units, Residential Treatment Centers, and Crisis Stabilization Units. The risk for suicide, the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, escalates significantly without proper treatment.

While physicians concede that depression is a serious disorder that is common enough to warrant screening and that effective treatment is available, many believe that the screening process requires too much time and effort. The Patient Health Questionnaire two-item scale (PHQ-2) is a reasonable alternative screening measure given its brevity and potential to be administered during the clinical interview.

The PHQ-2 has been validated in clinical settings and has been found to be as effective as other depression screens. Psychometric studies have found that the PHQ-2 has sensitivity and specificity in the 80 - 90+ percent range.

The PHQ-2 consists of the first two items from the longer Patient Health Questionnaire-9, which consists of nine items that align with the DSM-IV criteria for major depression. The PHQ-2 inquires about the frequency of depressed mood and loss of pleasure or interest over the past 2 weeks. Its purpose is not to establish a final diagnosis, but to screen for depression as an initial approach. A PHQ-2 score ranges from zero - six, with recommendations for further screening with a PHQ-9 for anyone scoring a three and above.