Root Cause
Regardless of your discipline, comprehensive assessment requires developing the ability to see root cause drivers of patient instability. Reviewing patterns in their medical record for at least 3 years prior to referral can help to identify patterns and opportunities for improving care. There are four common root cause quadrants of complexity – medical, behavioral health (mental health and substance use disorders), social, and systems root causes.

Medical
In addition to identifying the patient's medical diagnoses it is helpful to look at common root causes experienced by complex patients. These include:
- Which diagnoses are actually driving high frequency access to the healthcare system?
- Is the patient receiving evidence based treatment for these chronic diseases?
- Does the patient have high frequency access because of declining health and are they appropriate for hospice care? If so, do they have an advance directive?
- Is the patient competent to make his or her own decisions? If not, does he or she have a guardian?
- Does the patient have an evidence based plan for chronic pain and symptom management?

Learning to ask these baseline medical questions will help prepare you to see complex patients through a more comprehensive lens.

Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder (SUD)

Many high utilizing patients have an underlying mental health or substance use disorder diagnosis (SUD). Learning to deepen your assessment of root causes in this quadrant will help you to identify potential areas to help complex patients. Some questions you can add to your standard assessment include:

- Does the patient have a mental health or SUD diagnosis in the medical record?
- If so, are they receiving evidence based treatment for this diagnosis?
- If the patient has a SUD diagnosis, what is the patient's substance(s) of choice?
- Are there conflicting behavioral health and/or SUD diagnoses in the record?

These questions will begin to point to potential areas for improvement in the plan of care to help stabilize complex patients.

Social

There is growing evidence of the important impact of social factors on health and high frequency healthcare access. Many disciplines have not learned to ask questions about social root causes as part of standard assessment. Some questions you can add to your assessment include:

- Does the patient have safe housing?
- Does the patient have transportation for medical appointments?
- Does the patient have communication barriers (i.e. limited access to phone or minutes on cell phone)?
- Does the patient have access to food?
- What is their level of health literacy (i.e. can they read, do they understand their disease)?
- Are they socially isolated or in an unsafe situation (i.e. domestic violence)?

These questions can help identify potential areas that may be impacting high frequency access to the healthcare system.

System

Complex patients often require care from multiple disconnected health care providers. This often creates serious gaps in care and services. Looking for system related root causes can help identify areas for improvement within the delivery system. Here are examples of additional questions that can help to identify these system issues.

- Does the patient have access to primary care, specialty care and the medications they need?
- Are they receiving conflicting medications from different providers? Are they receiving opioid, benzodiazepine or amphetamine prescriptions from more than one provider?
- Are they experiencing ethical dilemmas (i.e. fired from care)?
- Are there gaps in the plan of care happening in transition between settings?

These questions can help identify potential areas within a healthcare system that may be impacting high frequency access.

Root Cause Pattern of Access

Additionally, when completing a comprehensive assessment, it is helpful to review the patient's visits in the last 12 months. This helps to identify the root cause drivers that fuel their access to the system. Looking at the drivers of access instead of their diagnoses can point to important gaps in care, gaps in resources or undiagnosed mental health and/or substance use disorder issues.

Case Study

Now that you have been introduced to root cause assessment it's time to practice. Find one patient that is currently in your Complex Care program. Using the guiding questions above, review the medical record and complete the following assessment.

4 Quadrants of Complexity Please fill in the boxes below based on any information you know about the individual you're working with:	
Medical	Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder
•	•
Social	Systems
•	•

Utilization (Past Year)

Type	Number in previous 12 months	Root Cause
ED		
Inpatient admissions		
Length of stay (days)		

Reflecting on the patient stories and materials you reviewed - answer the following questions:

What surprised you from this exercise? What did you find that you normally would not have seen with a standard assessment from your discipline?