

The Impact of Social Workers in Medical Crises: Bridging Patient Care Gaps

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ABSTRACT

Social workers are pivotal in addressing the social determinants of health (e.g., income, education, food, and housing), which contribute significantly to health outcomes and inequalities globally. Their role is increasingly recognized as essential, especially in medical crises, where non-medical factors exacerbate health challenges. This review highlights their contributions to healthcare resilience during crises, including crisis intervention strategies, mental health support, systemic advocacy, and bridging patient care gaps. Drawing on evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic and broader healthcare frameworks, this review underscores the need for an integrated approach to patient-centered care. Social workers not only enhance the effectiveness of health systems by coordinating care but also address inequities and provide emotional support to patients and families during crises.

KEYWORDS: World Health Organization, social workers, patient care.

1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), non-medical factors, such as income, education, food and housing, account for 30-55 per cent of health outcomes (World Health Organization n.d.). These factors, otherwise known as the social determinants of health, are the conditions into which people enter, live and exit their lives. They are acknowledged to have a substantial influence on health inequities seen within and between countries (World Health Organization 2008). In fact, more positive health outcomes are often seen among countries with greater total investment in health and social care spending compared to health spending alone (Bradley et al. 2011; Davis 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized

inequities in health care access, treatment and outcomes across populations, particularly in low- to middle-income countries (LMIC) where fewer domestic resources are invested in health systems and where development assistance is often provided by donors. As countries embark on building back better, responding to social and other non-medical factors exacerbated by the pandemic will be fundamental for improving health and reducing inequities—and will require action by all sectors and civil society (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance 2020; Franceschini et al. 2021; Chen and Zhuang 2020; A. Ross et al. 2021a; Chigangaidze 2022; Prasad and Deshwal 2022).

The social service workforce plays a unique and powerful role in supporting individuals and communities in addressing social and other determinants of health. This role is characterized by application of a person-in- environment approach to assessing needs and facilitating access to needed services, promotion of social justice and human rights, and prevention and response to issues of behavioral and mental health, violence, abuse and neglect. This workforce constitutes a broad array of governmental and non-governmental practitioners, researchers, managers and educators, both professional and para professional. It includes but is not limited to social workers, social educators, social pedagogues, medical (health) social workers, child and youth care workers, community workers, welfare officers, social/cultural animators and case managers (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance n.d.). To enable countries to meaningfully tackle social and other determinants of health across the humanitarian and development spectrum and achieve universal health coverage¹, a well-developed and qualified social service workforce working in and linked to health facilities, holds much promise.

Medical crises present significant challenges to healthcare systems, necessitating effective responses and management strategies. Various frameworks and interventions involving doctors, paramedics, nurses, and social workers. This review was carried out to synthesize the evidence concerning social work roles for that can enhance the resilience and adaptability of healthcare organizations during such crises. This response synthesizes key insights from the relevant papers, focusing on adaptive frameworks, crisis counseling, training for first responders, and communication strategies.

Aim of work

This review aims to explore the critical role of social workers in medical crises. It seeks to:

1. Identify the key functions and responsibilities of social workers in such situations.
2. Analyze the impact of social work interventions on patient outcomes and healthcare system performance.
3. Highlight the challenges faced by social workers in crisis contexts and propose strategies to enhance their effectiveness.
4. Advocate for the integration of social work into healthcare systems to improve overall health and well-being.

Adaptive Healthcare Organizations

- The Adaptive Healthcare Organization (AHO) framework emphasizes real-time adaptability to unexpected medical crises, enhancing efficiency and effectiveness (Carter & Burke, 2023)
- It comprises seven key capabilities that guide healthcare institutions in navigating crises, ensuring timely and appropriate responses.

Medical Crisis Counseling

- Medical crisis counseling (MCC) supports patients and families coping with chronic illnesses, addressing concerns like control and isolation (eIequtf713, 2022)
- Typically initiated at critical points, MCC aims to mitigate the psychological impact of medical crises through structured interventions.

Training for First Responders

- Effective training for medical first responders (MFRs) is crucial for optimal performance during disasters (Baetzner et al., 2022)
- A systematic review indicates that both traditional and technology-based training methods enhance preparedness, with technology often yielding superior outcomes.

Communication Strategies

- The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for robust communication strategies to combat misinformation (Nadareishvili et al., 2023)
- Strengthening the role of healthcare professionals as educators and leaders is essential for improving public compliance with health directives.

While these frameworks and strategies provide a foundation for managing medical crises, challenges remain, particularly in resource-limited settings where effective crisis management is often hindered by inadequate funding and infrastructure (Shchyrina et al., 2022)

Impact of Social Workers:

- Role of social workers in healthcare system

The role of social workers in healthcare is increasingly recognized as vital for improving health outcomes and addressing social determinants of health. Their contributions span various settings, enhancing patient care through interprofessional collaboration and targeted interventions. This overview highlights the key impacts of social workers in healthcare.

Contributions to Health Outcomes

- Social workers implement transitional care interventions, particularly for older patients, which have shown positive health and cost outcomes (Ross et al., 2024).
- They play a crucial role in primary care by addressing social determinants

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Enabling a holistic approach to health care

- The involvement of the social service workforce in health facilities can expand the traditional medical model, which focuses on diagnosing and treating disease with medical interventions, with a recognition of and support for the social and other factors that enable more effective and lasting treatment.
- Incorporating this “social work” lens can result in increased access to advice and support to make changes in certain at-risk populations’ behavior, social situation and environment, resulting in reduced hospital readmission rates, reduced length of patient stays in hospital, and reduced costs for health providers and/or patients (Collins, A., 2024).

Addressing Social Determinants of Health

- A significant proportion of the underlying factors contributing to poor health are social and behavioral, as much as physiological. In identifying, preventing and ameliorating these factors—including poverty, social exclusion, poor nutrition and housing, hazardous living conditions, abuse and violence—the social service workforce can play a key role in preventing or reducing illness and a range of health conditions. The preventive role can involve primary prevention (preventing initial onset of health conditions in the whole population) as well as secondary prevention (preventing or reducing ill health amongst the most at-risk populations or preventing its recurrence) (Andrews et al. 2015; Stanhope et al. 2015).
- Social workers are uniquely positioned to tackle social, economic, and environmental factors affecting health, often collaborating with medical professionals to provide comprehensive care (Feryn et al., 2023).
- Their expertise is essential in integrated care models, where they help bridge gaps in services and support vulnerable populations (Feryn et al., 2023).

Impact of COVID-19

- The pandemic has reshaped the roles of social workers, highlighting their adaptability and the need for proactive responses to maintain patient-centered care (Nicholas et al., 2023).
- Increased demands during this period have underscored the importance of social work in healthcare settings, revealing both challenges and opportunities for growth (Nicholas et al., 2023).

Coordinating integrated care:

- The social service workforce is trained and ideally placed to assess, plan and coordinate complex packages of care and support. This care may involve input from medical practitioners and therapists, the support of community volunteers and civil society groups, and coordination with local social welfare departments, early childhood services and schools (Collins, A., 2024).

Early identification & intervention in cases of violence against children, women or elders:

- Deployment in health settings can enable social workers with statutory child protection roles, as well as those involved in the assessment and intervention in cases of intimate partner violence, sexual violence and elder abuse, an opportunity for early identification of risk factors and signs of abuse as presented in injuries, behavior or concerns expressed by patients or their family member on admission to hospital or when arriving for emergency treatment (Collins, A., 2024).

While the contributions of social workers are significant, there remains a need for further empirical evidence and clarity regarding their roles within healthcare systems. This could enhance their integration and effectiveness in addressing complex health challenges.

□ The Role of Social Workers in Medical Crises

The role of social workers in medical crises is multifaceted, encompassing direct intervention, emotional support, and systemic advocacy. Their involvement is crucial in addressing the immediate needs of patients and families while also navigating the complexities of healthcare systems. This response will explore the various impacts of social workers during medical crises, highlighting their interventions, challenges, and the importance of support systems.

Crisis Intervention Strategies

- Social workers provide critical support to patients experiencing traumatic events, such as sudden death, by offering grief counseling and guidance through the healthcare process.
- In hospital settings, social workers engage in on-call services, responding to emergencies outside regular hours, which requires preparation and effective support to mitigate stress.

Impact on Mental Health

- The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the challenges faced by medical social workers, revealing a strong correlation between perceived social support and professional quality of life, with informal support significantly reducing burnout.
- Pediatric social workers have reported increased burnout and coping challenges due to heightened patient acuity and systemic inequities exacerbated by the pandemic.

Systemic Advocacy

- Social workers play a vital role in advocating for health equity, particularly in addressing disparities highlighted during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Their involvement in policy reform and decision-making processes within hospitals is essential for improving patient care and addressing social determinants of health.

While social workers significantly contribute to crisis management in medical

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settings, the emotional toll and systemic challenges they face cannot be overlooked. Addressing their mental health and providing adequate support is crucial for sustaining their effectiveness in these high-pressure environments.

□ The Impact of Social Workers in Bridging Patient Care Gaps

The impact of social workers in bridging patient care gaps is significant, as they address social determinants of health and enhance the quality of care across various healthcare settings. Social workers play a crucial role in improving patient outcomes by facilitating communication, providing support, and advocating for vulnerable populations. Their involvement is essential in both primary care and specialized settings, as evidenced by several studies.

Role in Primary Care

- Social workers implement quality improvement initiatives, such as the "Gap Closure Day," to address clinical quality gaps in family medicine practices (Lombardi et al., 2023).
- They identify social determinants affecting health, thereby improving health equity and patient outcomes.

Support in Specialized Care

- In cancer care, social workers assist patients through the entire continuum, from diagnosis to palliative care, despite facing challenges from unqualified practitioners (Agha et al., 2021).
- Their interventions in hospitals, including transitional care and care coordination, have shown significant improvements in readmission and mortality rates (Petruzzi et al., 2022).

Addressing Healthcare Inequality

- Social workers actively work to reduce healthcare inequalities by advocating for low socioeconomic patients and facilitating communication with medical staff (Baum et al., 2016).
- Their specialized training allows them to provide personalized support, which complements the medical staff's expertise (Dang et al., 2024).

While social workers significantly enhance patient care, challenges such as unqualified practitioners and systemic barriers persist, potentially undermining their effectiveness in certain contexts.

2. Conclusion

- Social workers play a multifaceted role in medical crises, bridging gaps between healthcare providers and patients by addressing non-medical factors affecting health outcomes. Their contributions include crisis counseling, facilitating integrated care, and advocating for systemic changes to reduce health disparities. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the adaptability and necessity of social workers in

healthcare, emphasizing their role in promoting equity and supporting vulnerable populations. However, systemic challenges such as burnout, inadequate recognition, and limited resources must be addressed to sustain their effectiveness. Investing in the training, mental health, and professional integration of social workers into healthcare systems is crucial for improving crisis response and patient outcomes.

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