

# The Impact of Social Workers in Healthcare Crisis: Closing Gaps in Patient Care

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## **Abstract**

Social workers have a crucial role in tackling the social determinants of health (e.g., income, education, nutrition, and housing), which significantly influence health outcomes and inequalities worldwide. Their position is widely seen as vital, particularly during medical crises, as non-medical variables intensify health issues. This analysis emphasizes their contributions to healthcare resilience during crises, including crisis intervention tactics, mental health support, systemic advocacy, and addressing patient care disparities. This analysis highlights the necessity for a cohesive strategy in patient-centered treatment, informed by evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic and broader healthcare frameworks. Social workers improve health system efficacy through care coordination while also tackling disparities and offering emotional support to patients and families in times of crisis.

**Keywords:** World Health Organization, social workers, patient care.

## **1. Introduction**

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that non-medical determinants, including income, education, nutrition, and housing, contribute to 30-55 percent of health outcomes (World Health Organization n.d.). These elements, otherwise referred to as the social determinants of health, are the situations in which individuals are born, reside, and ultimately depart from life. They are recognized to exert a significant impact on health inequities observed both within and between nations (World Health Organization 2008). Indeed, nations that allocate more resources to health and social care expenditures typically experience superior health results compared to those that invest just in health spending (Bradley et al. 2011; Davis 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted disparities in healthcare access, treatment, and results among populations, especially in low- to middle-income countries (LMIC) that allocate limited domestic resources to health systems and frequently rely on donor-provided development aid. In order to improve health and reduce inequities, countries will need to address social and other non-medical factors that the pandemic has made worse. This will require action from civil society and all sectors of the economy (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 uniquely and significantly supports individuals and communities in tackling social and other health determinants. This position involves employing a person-in-environment framework to evaluate needs and provide access to essential services, advocating for social justice and human rights, and addressing behavioral and mental health concerns, as well as

violence, abuse, and neglect. This workforce comprises a diverse range of governmental and non-governmental practitioners, researchers, managers, and educators, including both professional and paraprofessional individuals. It encompasses, but is not confined to, social workers, social educators, social pedagogues, medical social workers, child and youth care professionals, community workers, welfare officers, social/cultural animators, and case managers (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance n.d.). To empower nations to effectively address social and other determinants of health within the humanitarian and development spectrum and attain universal health coverage, a well-trained and competent social service staff integrated with health facilities presents significant potential.

Medical crises pose substantial difficulties to healthcare systems, requiring efficient responses and management measures. Diverse frameworks and interventions involving physicians, paramedics, nurses, and social workers. This research was conducted to consolidate evidence regarding social work roles that help bolster the resilience and adaptability of healthcare organizations during crises. This answer consolidates essential lessons from pertinent studies, emphasizing adaptive frameworks, crisis counseling, training for first responders, and communication tactics.

### **The study objectives**

This review seeks to examine the essential function of social workers during medical emergencies. It aims to:

1. Identify the principal functions and duties of social workers in these circumstances.
2. Examine the effects of social work interventions on patient outcomes and the efficacy of the healthcare system.
3. Identify the challenges encountered by social workers in crisis situations and provide measures to improve their efficacy.
4. Promote the incorporation of social work within healthcare systems to enhance overall health and well-being.

### **The Adaptive Healthcare Organization**

- The Adaptive Healthcare Organization (AHO) framework prioritizes real-time flexibility to unforeseen medical crises, hence improving efficiency and efficacy (Carter & Burke, 2023).
- It encompasses seven essential qualities that assist healthcare facilities in managing crises, providing prompt and suitable reactions.
- Medical Crisis Counseling (MCC) assists patients and families managing chronic illnesses by addressing issues such as control and isolation (elequtf7l3, 2022).
- MCC is typically launched at critical junctures to alleviate the psychological effects of medical emergencies through organized interventions.

### **Training for Medical First Responders.**

- Comprehensive training for medical first responders (MFRs) is essential for optimal efficacy during emergencies (Baetmer et al., 2022)
- A thorough review demonstrates that both conventional and technology-driven training techniques improve preparation, with technology frequently producing better results.

### **Communication techniques.**

- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the necessity for effective communication techniques to counter misinformation (Nadareishvili et al., 2023)
- Enhancing the role of healthcare professionals as educators and leaders is crucial for augmenting public adherence to health guidelines.
- Although these frameworks and tactics establish a basis for treating medical emergencies,

obstacles persist, especially in resource-constrained environments where effective crisis management is frequently obstructed by insufficient money and infrastructure (Shchyrina et al., 2022).

### **Impact of Social Workers**

The role of social workers in healthcare is increasingly acknowledged as essential for enhancing health outcomes and addressing social determinants of health. Their contributions encompass diverse environments, improving patient care via interprofessional collaboration and specific interventions. This overview delineates the significant effects of social workers within the healthcare sector.

#### **Impact on Health Outcomes**

- Social workers execute transitional care interventions for older patients, demonstrating favorable health and cost outcomes (Ross et al., 2024).
- They are essential in primary care by addressing social determinants of health, which enhances quality metrics and promotes health equity (Lombardi et al., 2023).

#### **Facilitating a comprehensive approach to health care**

- The integration of the social service workforce within health facilities enhances the conventional medical model, which primarily emphasizes disease diagnosis and treatment through medical interventions, by acknowledging and addressing the social determinants that contribute to more effective and sustainable treatment outcomes.
- Applying a social work perspective can lead to improved access to guidance and support for modifying behaviors, social circumstances, and environments among at-risk populations, thereby decreasing hospital readmission rates, shortening patient hospital stays, and lowering costs for healthcare providers and patients (Collins, A., 2024).

#### **Resolving Health's Social Determinants**

- A considerable percentage of the factors influencing poor health are social and behavioral, in addition to physiological aspects. The social service workforce is instrumental in identifying, preventing, and addressing factors such as poverty, social exclusion, inadequate nutrition and housing, hazardous living conditions, and instances of abuse and violence, thereby contributing to the prevention or reduction of illness and various health conditions. The preventive role encompasses primary prevention, which aims to avert the initial onset of health conditions in the entire population, and secondary prevention, which focuses on reducing ill health among high-risk populations or preventing recurrence (Andrews et al. 2015; Stanhope et al. 2015).
- Social workers are strategically positioned to address social, economic, and environmental determinants of health, frequently collaborating with medical professionals to deliver integrated care (Feryn et al., 2023).
- Their expertise is crucial in integrated care models, facilitating the bridging of service gaps and supporting vulnerable populations (Feryn et al., 2023).

#### **The effects of COVID-19**

- The pandemic has transformed the roles of social workers, emphasizing their adaptability and the necessity for proactive measures to sustain patient-centered care (Nicholas et al., 2023).
- Increased demands during this period have highlighted the significance of social work in healthcare settings, exposing both challenges and opportunities for growth (Nicholas et al., 2023).

- Coordinating integrated care involves a trained social service workforce that is optimally positioned to assess, plan, and coordinate complex care and support packages. This care may require contributions from medical professionals and therapists, assistance from community volunteers and civil society organizations, and collaboration with local social welfare agencies, early childhood programs, and educational institutions (Collins, A., 2024).

Timely recognition and intervention in instances of violence against children, women, or the elderly:

Deployment in health settings can provide social workers with statutory child protection responsibilities, as well as those engaged in assessing and intervening in cases of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and elder abuse, with an opportunity for early identification of risk factors and signs of abuse. These may be indicated by injuries, behaviors, or concerns expressed by patients or their family members upon hospital admission or during emergency treatment (Collins, A., 2024).

Even while social workers make important contributions, more empirical data and clarification of their functions within healthcare systems are still required. This may improve their integration and efficacy in tackling complex health challenges.

### **The Function of Social Workers in Healthcare Emergencies**

The role of social workers in medical crises includes direct intervention, emotional support, and systemic advocacy. In order to navigate the intricacies of healthcare systems and meet the urgent needs of patients and their families, their engagement is essential. This response examines the impacts of social workers during medical crises, focusing on their interventions, challenges, and the significance of support systems.

### **Crisis intervention strategies**

- Social workers offer essential assistance to patients facing traumatic events, including sudden death, by delivering grief counseling and navigating the healthcare process.
- Within hospital environments, social workers participate in on-call services, addressing emergencies beyond standard hours, necessitating readiness and efficient support to alleviate stress.

### **Impact on Mental Health.**

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges encountered by medical social workers, demonstrating a significant relationship between perceived social support and professional quality of life, with informal support notably mitigating burnout.
- Pediatric social workers have indicated a rise in burnout and coping difficulties attributed to increased patient acuity and systemic inequities intensified by the pandemic.
- Systemic advocacy refers to efforts aimed at influencing and reforming policies and practices within a system to promote social change and address systemic issues.
- Social workers are crucial in advocating for health equity, especially in mitigating disparities exposed during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Their participation in policy reform and decision-making within hospitals is fundamental for enhancing patient care and addressing social determinants of health.

Social workers play a crucial role in crisis management within medical environments; however, the emotional burden and systemic obstacles they encounter warrant attention. Addressing mental health and providing adequate support is essential for maintaining effectiveness in high-pressure environments.

## **The Role of Social Workers in Addressing Gaps in Patient Care**

The role of social workers in addressing patient care gaps is substantial, as they tackle social determinants of health and improve care quality in diverse healthcare environments. Social workers significantly enhance patient outcomes through effective communication, support provision, and advocacy for marginalized groups. Their participation is crucial in both primary care and specialized contexts, as demonstrated by multiple studies.

### **The function of primary care**

- Social workers execute quality improvement initiatives, including the "Gap Closure Day," to rectify clinical quality deficiencies in family medicine practices (Lombardi et al., 2023).
- They identify social determinants that influence health, thereby enhancing health equity and patient outcomes.

### **Assistance in Specialized Healthcare**

- Social workers play a crucial role in cancer care, supporting patients throughout the continuum from diagnosis to palliative care, even in the face of challenges posed by unqualified practitioners (Agha et al., 2021).
- Interventions in hospitals, such as transitional care and care coordination, have demonstrated significant improvements in readmission and mortality rates (Petruzzi et al., 2022).
- Addressing Healthcare Inequality • Social workers engage in efforts to mitigate healthcare inequalities by advocating for patients from low socioeconomic backgrounds and enhancing communication with medical personnel (Baum et al., 2016).
- Specialized training enables the provision of personalized support that complements the expertise of the medical staff (Dang et al., 2024).

Social workers play a crucial role in improving patient care; however, issues such as unqualified practitioners and systemic barriers continue to exist, which may compromise their effectiveness in specific situations.

## **2- Conclusion**

Social workers assume a complex role in medical crises, connecting healthcare providers and patients while addressing non-medical factors that influence health outcomes. Their contributions encompass crisis counseling, the facilitation of integrated care, and advocacy for systemic changes aimed at reducing health disparities. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the adaptability and essential role of social workers in healthcare, particularly in promoting equity and supporting vulnerable populations. Systemic challenges, including burnout, insufficient recognition, and resource limitations, must be addressed to maintain their effectiveness. Investment in the training, mental health support, and professional integration of social workers within healthcare systems is essential for enhancing crisis response and patient outcomes.

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