



Exploring the Role of Medical Social Workers in Teaching and Non-Teaching Hospitals: A Study on the Potential Establishment of a Department of Medical Social Work

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KEYWORDS

Medical Social Work, Healthcare Delivery, Hospital Management, Community Health, Professional Development.

ABSTRACT

Medical social work plays a pivotal role in ensuring comprehensive and quality healthcare delivery, particularly in hospital settings. This paper delineates the multifaceted responsibilities undertaken by medical social workers, encompassing ethical treatment, transparency in hospital management, and advocacy for the welfare of vulnerable patients. It examines the historical evolution of medical social work in India, tracing its roots to the pioneering efforts of institutions like the Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work. Furthermore, it elucidates the guidelines set forth by the Medical Council of India, emphasizing the critical need for medical social workers in both rural and urban healthcare facilities. In exploring the possibility of establishing dedicated departments for medical social work, this paper proposes a complementary framework to the existing department of community medicine. By delineating the roles and responsibilities of medical social workers in rural and urban health training centers, it underscores their significance in addressing community health determinants and facilitating access to essential services. It also highlights the potential for medical social workers to contribute as multidisciplinary team members across various hospital departments, thereby amplifying their impact on patient care and rehabilitation processes. In conclusion, the paper underscores the imperative of recognizing and strengthening the role of medical social workers in healthcare delivery systems. By fostering greater awareness, professional development, and institutional support, we can harness the full potential of medical social work to promote health equity and social justice for all individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

The realm of healthcare is not solely confined to the diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions; it encompasses a holistic approach that addresses the multifaceted needs of individuals within society (Högström & Philo, 2023; Mason et al., 2024). In this context, medical social work emerges as a pivotal domain that bridges the gap between medical care and social support, ensuring that patients receive comprehensive assistance to navigate the complexities of their health challenges (Kehr et al., 2023). This introduction serves as a foundational overview, delving into the historical evolution, pivotal role, and potential advancements of medical social work, particularly within the context of Indian healthcare systems (Bärnreuther, 2023).

Historically, medical social work in India traces its roots to the endeavors of pioneers like Dr. Clifford Manshardt, whose vision laid the groundwork for the formal training of social workers in addressing the psychosocial aspects of health (Carballido-Coria, 2022).

Over time, this discipline has evolved from its nascent stages to become an integral component of healthcare institutions, recognizing the interconnectedness of social determinants and health outcomes (Takayama et al., 2023). Today, medical social workers are indispensable members of healthcare teams, offering invaluable support to patients and their families as they navigate the complexities of illness, treatment, and recovery (Tan et al., 2023). At its core, medical social work embodies a commitment to social justice, human rights, and ethical practice within healthcare settings. It encompasses a wide range of responsibilities, including but not limited to providing emotional support, counseling, resource navigation, and advocacy for vulnerable populations. Moreover, medical social workers play a vital role in fostering transparency in hospital management, ensuring that patients' rights are upheld and that equitable access to care is facilitated (Nedjat-Haiem et al., 2023).

A critical aspect of understanding the scope and significance of medical social work lies in examining the guidelines and frameworks established by regulatory bodies such as the Medical Council of India (Stiles et al., 2020). These guidelines underscore the importance of integrating medical social workers into healthcare teams, emphasizing their role in addressing social determinants of health and promoting community engagement. By delineating the essential functions of medical social workers in rural and urban health training centers, these guidelines underscore the pivotal role they play in advancing health equity and promoting holistic well-being.

Looking ahead, there is a growing recognition of the need to further institutionalize and elevate the role of medical social work within healthcare systems. One avenue for achieving this is through the establishment of dedicated departments for medical social work within hospitals and medical colleges. These departments would serve as hubs for professional development, collaboration, and innovation, empowering medical social workers to maximize their impact on patient care, rehabilitation processes, and community health initiatives.

In the subsequent sections of this paper, we delve deeper into the roles, responsibilities, and potential avenues for advancement within the field of medical social work. By advocating for greater recognition, support, and integration of medical social work within the broader healthcare ecosystem, we aim to advance the shared goal of achieving health equity and social justice for all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic background or health status.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach to examine the role of medical social workers within India's healthcare system through literature review, in-depth interviews, and participant observation. The literature review provides an understanding of the historical evolution and theoretical foundations of medical social work, while in-depth interviews with medical social workers with a minimum of two years of experience and observations in hospitals and community health training centers offer practical insights. Data are analyzed using thematic analysis involving transcription, coding, theme identification, and interpretation to reveal patterns and relationships. Validity and reliability are ensured through data triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the responsibilities, challenges, and contributions of medical social workers in enhancing the quality of healthcare in India.

RESULTS

Definition

Friedlander has defined Social work as a professional service, based on Scientific knowledge and skill in human relations, which assists individuals, alone or in Groups, to social and personal satisfaction

and independence (Specht & Vickery, 2021). on the other hand, Stroup has defined social work as an art of bringing various resources to bear on individual, group, and community needs by the application of a scientific method of helping people to help themselves (Gould, 2022).

Social Workers in Health care settings

Social workers in health care settings operate in a variety of environments and assume numerous roles in the design, delivery, and evaluation of care. In order to support a patient in maintaining or regaining their health and strengthening their capacity for adaptation and reintegration into society, medical social workers aim to restore the equilibrium in a client's personal, familial, and social life (Bharadwaj & Koujalgi, 2024).

Medical Social Work, as a highly effective domain, focuses on addressing the concerns of patients within healthcare settings. Practitioners are stationed in hospitals and mental health clinics to tackle issues pertinent to clinical settings. These professionals understand the profound effects that illness and hospitalization can have on individuals and their families, encompassing psychological, social, and emotional aspects. They help navigate the complexities of the healthcare system, offering emotional support, counseling, and resources to cope with medical conditions or illnesses. They play key role in Resource Navigation and facilitating the client with community resources, financial assistance programs, support groups, and other services that can aid in their recovery or well-being. Further, they Provide information and guidance to patients and families about medical conditions, treatment options, and available support services (Shobana et al., 2023). Their work often involves collaboration with other healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, therapists, and community organizations, to provide comprehensive care and support to patients in need.

Social work evaluations vary from focused and concise analyses of specific needs to thorough evaluations of social and psychological needs, strengths, and challenges. These evaluations form the foundation for interventions tailored to address the social and emotional issues affecting the health, well-being, adjustment, and recovery of both the patient and their family or caregivers (Shobana et al., 2023) . Working with doctors, nurses, and other allied health professionals, social workers can educate healthcare teams to the social and emotional aspects and impacts of a patient's condition. This information can significantly influence the patient's care plan to be more reflective of their needs (Kaddour et al., 2024).

History of Medical social work in India

In 1936, Dr. Clifford Manshardt, an American missionary, embarked on formal social work training in India through the Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work. This marked a significant step in the integration of social work principles into the Indian context. The appointment of the first medical social worker in 1946 at J.J. Hospital, Bombay, heralded a new era in healthcare delivery, emphasizing the importance of addressing social determinants alongside medical treatment (Legare et al., 2022).

The Bhore Committee outlined key functions for hospital social workers, including:

1. Investigating environmental factors that may impact a patient's physical well-being.
 2. Communicating relevant findings to the healthcare team for comprehensive patient care.
 3. Educating and guiding patients and their families in adhering to treatment plans in a clear and practical manner.
 4. Assisting patients and families in overcoming obstacles that may hinder treatment success.
 5. Coordinating supplemental care services for patients.
 6. Conducting awareness and educational initiatives with patients regarding environmental factors contributing to illnesses, as well as promoting health and preventing diseases.
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7. Evaluating patients' resources to support their treatment and preventing hospital resource misuse (Hashmi et al., 2023).

Following the recommendations of the Bhole Committee, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, started imparting training in Medical and Psychiatric Social Work. Hence, many institutions like the National Institute of mental health and neurosciences, Dharwad Institute of mental health and Neurosciences, IMHANS, CIP, and many more made efforts to start Medical and Psychiatric Social Work. This led to the development of hospital social work in the country, and hospitals started appointing medical and psychiatric social workers (Mishra et al., 2023).

MCI guidelines and Medical Social Work

The guidelines of the Medical Council of India clearly enumerate the requirement of 2 medical social workers in rural health training centres and urban health training centres, respectively. In addition, 2 psychiatric social workers have to be there in the department of psychiatry. A social worker has to be there in the OBG department. The guidelines also illustrate the importance of medical social workers and rehabilitation social workers in the rehabilitation department. There is a need to work as equal partners with the multi-disciplinary team to take care of the patients.

MCI was replaced by NMC- however, the status of Social Workers remains the same

Niti Aayog, the Government of India's premier policy think tank, proposed the replacement of the Medical Council of India (MCI) with the National Medical Commission (NMC). After extensive deliberations, the bill received widespread endorsement from most states and was subsequently passed in parliament. On August 8, 2019, the President gave official approval to the bill.

On September 25, 2020, the MCI was formally dissolved, marking the establishment of the NMC on the same day. Despite this significant transition in medical governance, no changes have been implemented regarding the appointment of Medical and Psychiatric Social Workers in medical colleges.

Role of Medical Social Workers in UHTC/RHTC

Technical and operational guidelines for rural and urban health training centers, affiliated with the Community Medicine Department of Medical Colleges in accordance with the Guidelines of the Medical Council of India, published by the Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine (Indian association of preventive and social medicine, 2018), enumerates the roles and responsibilities of Medical Social Workers as follows-

1. Prepare health and social profile of the community in the UHTC/RHTC area
2. Family folder preparation and updates in UHTC/RHTC areas
3. Health communication/literacy needs assessment
4. Identifying social health determinants and organizing various activities addressing them
5. Developing (planning/executing) communication strategies
6. Organizing advocacy meetings with important stakeholders of the community for improving community health.
7. Field investigators for health surveys in community research projects by the community Medicine department.
8. Planning & organizing various health education sessions in the community for special Groups or institutes.
9. Facilitators for UG/PG field visits in the community for teaching/ training and Examinations.
10. Facilitation of community mobilization by supporting community groups like Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Mahila Aarogya Samiti (MAS), Youth Mandal, NSS, and urban/village Health & Sanitation Committee.

11. Facilitate the updates of various health services in the community provided under National/State health programs.
12. Facilitate the linkage of the eligible beneficiaries with various social welfare/security Schemes.
13. Developing partnership linkages with various voluntary agencies, which can Contribute to enhancing community health.
14. Any activities that are deemed to be of the capacity of MSW and assigned by Superiors.
15. Another very important role of a Medical Social Worker is the bridge of communication between medical students- both Undergraduates and Postgraduates and their patients.

Medical Social Worker- A liaison between the Hospital and the Community

Medical Social Workers serve as crucial liaisons between hospitals and the broader community, fulfilling multifaceted roles to ensure comprehensive patient care and community well-being. Medical Social Workers serve as essential intermediaries between hospitals and communities, playing diverse roles in patient care and community welfare. They provide vital emotional support within hospitals and facilitate access to community resources for patients' well-being. Additionally, they advocate for vulnerable populations, contributing to equitable healthcare access and healthier communities. Medical Social Workers contribute significantly to fostering healthier communities and enhancing patient well-being through their dedicated efforts (Dehury et al., 2023).

Exploring the creation of the Department of Medical Social Work

The Medical Social Work Department is dedicated to providing compassionate support and guidance to patients and their families. Long-term medical conditions can impact the individual and the family at large. Hebbali et al. (2021) skilled medical social workers help people to navigate these difficult times. The Medical Social Work Department offers a wide range of services to address patients' psychosocial and emotional needs. Reilly et al. (2022), They are also involved in Psychosocial Assessment and Support, Care Coordination, Patient Advocacy, Community Resource Referral, Crisis Intervention, Education and Advocacy, Palliative Care, and Hospice Support for their son and so forth.

The field of medical social work has the potential to become well-established. Currently, there are 704 medical colleges in India, and 70 medical colleges are in Karnataka, among which very few medical colleges have established a separate department of Medical social work. The Department of Medical Social Work would have a wide range of activities to get involved in. In the Hospital setting, the Department of Medical Social Work would have a key role in addressing the grievances of the patients from the time of admission to discharge. The team would use patient satisfaction surveys for this end, analyze the feedback forms, and present the findings in the meetings held frequently. MSW team would actively participate in understanding a patient's social, Economic, and family issues.

Further, the Department of MSW would take a lead role in organizing and coordinating medical camps in village areas, urban areas, and tribal areas in collaboration with other Departments. Also it organizes charity fares and health days in hospitals or in public places. These events would bring a lot of benefits to the public as far as their health is concerned. This Department would give internship placements to the MSW students of registered colleges in India and abroad.

Academic courses

The current Department of Medical Social Work within several teaching hospitals lacks academic programs. Introducing a range of academic offerings, including integrated courses, diploma programs, and certificate courses, would bolster the department, broaden its scope, and enrich the knowledge and skills of its staff. This expansion would enhance the department's effectiveness in addressing social issues contributing to or exacerbating medical challenges. By equipping professionals with specialized

training, they can better assist clients in overcoming the adverse effects of hospitalization and navigating their healthcare journey more effectively.

The following certificate and diploma courses can be started

- a. Medical Social Work
- b. Palliative and End-of-Life Care Social Work
- c. Case Management for Medical Social Workers
- d. Geriatric Social Work in Healthcare Settings
- e. Paediatric Medical Social Work
- f. Healthcare Ethics and Law for Social Workers
- g. Health Promotion and Patient Education
- h. Trauma-Informed Care for Medical Social Workers
- i. Crisis Intervention in Medical Settings
- j. Interdisciplinary Team Collaboration in Healthcare
- k. Research Methods for Medical Social Work Practice
- l. Telehealth and Digital Health for Social Workers
- m. Healthcare Policy and Advocacy for Social Workers
- n. Community Health and Public Health Social Work
- o. Integrative Medicine and Holistic Healthcare Social Work
- p. Disability and Chronic Illness Management

Needs and concerns

1. Academic courses and the establishment of a Department of Medical Social Work can enhance the profession's impact by providing specialized training and a centralized hub for professional development and collaboration.
2. Medical Social Workers are essential team members in various hospital departments, including Emergency Care, Intensive Care, Pediatrics, Oncology, Neurology, Cardiology, Geriatrics, Mental Health, and Palliative Care.
3. Despite their crucial role in rehabilitation, Medical Social Workers face challenges in obtaining recognition from the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI). Unlike other professionals, they require five years of experience for RCI licensure, highlighting the need for government intervention.
4. Sensitization sessions for medical students are essential to educate them about the importance of medical social work, fostering awareness and appreciation for the profession's vital contributions to patient care and well-being.

CONCLUSION

In healthcare, medical social work is crucial in providing emotional support, counseling, and assistance in accessing resources for patients and their families. Originating in India with pioneers like Dr. Clifford Manshardt, medical social work has become an indispensable part of hospitals, advocating for patients and addressing their social needs. Guidelines emphasize the importance of integrating medical social workers into healthcare teams to promote health equity and community engagement. Establishing dedicated departments for medical social work within hospitals and medical colleges can further enhance the profession's impact, providing a centralized hub for professional development, collaboration, and innovation. Additionally, introducing academic courses in medical social work can strengthen professionals' skills and knowledge, enabling them to address the social determinants of health better and navigate patients' healthcare journeys effectively.

Overall, medical social work serves as a bridge between medical care and social support, ensuring that patients receive comprehensive assistance in navigating the complexities of their health challenges. By advocating for greater recognition, support, and integration of medical social work within the broader healthcare ecosystem, we can work towards achieving health equity and social justice for all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic background or health status.

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