

MEDICAL SOCIAL WORKERS IN A WIDE RANGE OF MEDICAL SETTINGS AND PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENTS

¹Dr. Amadi, Uchechukwu and ²Ibiere Gloria Eric Amadi

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Abstract

Medical social workers are employed in various medical settings, such as hospitals and medical centers, specialized medical clinics, and public health departments. Medical Social Work primarily focuses on supporting patients and their families in hospitals, community clinics, and other healthcare settings by coordinating patient care with the larger medical team. According to the occupational profile created by the National Association of Social Work, social workers in the field of medical social work play an essential role in many of the non-medical aspects of patient care, including helping patients and their families navigate the medical system, assessing and monitoring the mental and emotional health of patients and their family members, providing short-term counseling and therapy, and communicating the needs and concerns of patients to the larger medical team. Medical social workers work closely with patients and family members who are experiencing mental, emotional, family, and/or financial stress due to their or their loved one's medical condition. Due to the types of challenges they encounter and the fast pace of medical settings, medical social workers may find this field to be stressful and demanding. This paper examines the various types of medical social workers in the medical setting and public health program and the dedicated and crucial role they play in the lives of patients and clients in bringing out wellness in various facets.

¹Department of Medical and Social Services, University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital, Port Harcourt, Nigeria;

²Department of Social Work, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt

E-mail: uchechukwuamadi@gmail.com, realqueenibiere1981@gmail.com

Introduction

Inpatient medical social workers

Social workers who are employed at hospitals and medical centers and provide specialized social services to patients with chronic and acute health conditions who require hospitalization are known as inpatient medical social workers. While some inpatient medical social workers stay within one medical unit or department, many spread their time across several units. Ms. Allen explained how medical social workers work throughout the John Muir Medical Center in an interview with Online MSW Programs:

“At John Muir, our medical social workers are assigned to different floors. We have nine different medical social workers per day, and the assignments are as follows: trauma intensive care (ICU)/(overflow) intensive care, neuro intensive care/progressive care unit, emergency room, acute rehabilitation (physical rehabilitation)/neuro progressive care, pediatric intensive care unit/mothers on labor and delivery/pediatrics, neonatal intensive care unit and mothers of these neonates, trauma med-surg/ortho med-surg (my floors), oncology med-surg/oncology surgeries, and renal med-surg/general surgeries.”

Ms. Allen also said that although medical social workers at John Muir Medical Center tend to focus on certain units, they also have a strong understanding of the hospital’s overall needs.

“On the weekends, there are only two medical social workers, and then we are also on-call for PICU (pediatric intensive care unit) and NICU (neonatal intensive care unit) to meet California Children’s Services (CCS) criteria, so though we all specialize in our floors, we all have to know how to do everything because we have to know how to do everything on the weekends and on call.”

Some inpatient medical social workers may specialize in a given area within the hospital, such as geriatrics, pediatrics, or psychiatric and intensive care, depending on their academic training and professional experiences. These medical social workers may also work in multiple units that serve similar populations. In an interview with Online MSW Programs, Ms. Beitch described how she worked in several areas of pediatric intensive care at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) before transitioning to her role at UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital. “I worked in the pediatric oncology service, neuro-oncology and neurosurgery service, general pediatric ward, pediatric ICU, and outpatient hematology, and I was hired as an employee in the bone marrow transplant service,” she said.

Medical social workers for inpatient settings collaborate daily with different teams and staff members.

“As a medical social worker on the bone marrow transplant unit at a teaching hospital,” Ms. Beitch said, “I work with a robust team that includes attending physicians, fellows, residents, nurse practitioners, nurses, nurse coordinators, nurse administrators, patient-care advocates, dietitians, food service attendants, child life specialists, art therapists, music therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, lab techs, pharmacists, administrative assistants, medical assistants, medical interpreters, financial representatives, descendent affairs staff, national foundations, community organizations, and other social workers (I’m probably forgetting a few people!).”

Role of a Social Worker in a Hospital Setting

NASW highlights the range of functions performed by social workers to help patients and their families navigate the medical system, including the following:

- Assessing new patients as they are admitted
- Providing emotional support or counseling
- Developing and implementing a patient’s care plan
- Working with agencies or insurance companies to cover treatment and medication costs

- Arrangement of outpatient treatments
- Developing a discharge plan
- Conducting training for staff to better meet patients' needs
- Developing health care policy and advocating for patients' rights

Outpatient medical social workers

Outpatient medical social workers work with patients who do not require hospitalization but still require medical care and guidance or who are transitioning from hospital care to outpatient care or their home. These patients often grapple with challenges similar to those faced by hospitalized patients and require similar services, such as resource navigation guidance, counseling, and care coordination.

Outpatient medical social workers can work at hospitals, medical centers, and specialty clinics. "We have outpatient social workers at LPCHS," Ms. Barnhardt said. "I may assist a patient/family on outpatient needs if they have recently been discharged, but I will usually sign out any ongoing outpatient needs to the assigned outpatient social worker." Ms. Barnhardt also worked as an outpatient medical social worker at Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare in St. Paul, Minnesota, and explained to Online MSW Programs how her duties were quite similar to those of her current role in inpatient pediatrics:

"When I worked at Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare, I was an outpatient medical social worker. At times, I would cover inpatients if we were short-staffed, but my primary role was as an outpatient. I worked with one other outpatient medical social worker, and we covered all the outpatient clinics," she recalled, "Part of our role was social work-related, including support and referrals to resources. However, the other part was caring coordination (case management), such as wheelchairs, hospital beds, and enteral supplies. It was similar to my current role at LPCHS as I had to prioritize my day, never knew what each day would hold, and I needed a general quickness to accomplish the tasks necessary each day. I would be paged to assess a situation, complete an evaluation, provide appropriate resources and support, make referrals as needed, and continue to work with the patient/family on an outpatient basis."

Ms. Earnhardt stated that medical social workers' responsibilities may span both inpatient and outpatient responsibilities. Furthermore, some medical social work roles involve regularly fulfilling or coordinating both inpatient and outpatient services. For example, in her role in the pediatric bone marrow transplant unit at UCSF, Ms. Beitch covers both the inpatient service and outpatient clinics, and noted to Online MSW Programs, "This is a great fit for me. "I enjoy the integration of acute illness with the opportunity to establish long-term relationships with patients and their families."

Medical Social Workers in Specialized Clinics

In addition to working in hospital settings, medical social workers can work for specialized clinics that serve populations suffering from very specific conditions or diseases. These clinics differ from hospital settings in that they serve individuals solely on an outpatient basis. Ms. Toledo explained the distinction between hospital settings and specialized clinics such as Satellite Healthcare to Online MSW Programs. "Working at a dialysis clinic is different from working at the hospital because the patients at a dialysis clinic are all patients with the same chronic illness—ESRD," she said, "Patients can require treatment anywhere from twice a week to five times a week, with each treatment running from 2 to 4 hours on average." Specialized clinics, such as Satellite Health care, often receive patients through referral hospitals and medical centers.

Medical social workers in specialized outpatient clinics often fulfill a wide range of responsibilities as their peers who work in larger hospital settings. Ms. Toledo explained to Online MSW Programs how she supports patients at Satellite Healthcare through a combination of resource navigation services, emotional support, guidance in

logistical matters such as housing and insurance, and any other issues that affect patients' mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

"I assist patients with adjusting to their illness, arranging dialysis while they travel, referrals to community resources, insurance support, kidney transplant referrals, transportation issues, housing and legal issues, behavior issues, complaints, encouragement of adherence to treatment regimen, and so on. "My day never looks the same as the previous day."

Public health educators and advocates

Medical social workers can also work for public health programs that provide education, guidance, advocacy, and resources to patients with chronic conditions. In her role as an Asthma Coordinator for the Asthma Start Program of the Alameda County Public Health Department, Ms. Silva provides education to children with asthma and their families regarding how to detect, medicate, and manage this condition. She also conducts home visits to assess for environmental asthma triggers.

Ms. Silva explained in an interview with Online MSW Programs,

"My responsibilities include educating families about asthma, including signs and symptoms such as coughing, shortness of breath, and retractions. I educate families about all the medications they are using, how they work, why they are important, and how to use them properly. I always have the child demonstrate to me how they use their medications and correct them if necessary. Finally, I conduct a home assessment in which I address any possible triggers in the home, such as mold, dust, and pests (i.e., roaches)."

Ms. Silva explained how she and her fellow social workers on the Asthma Start Program team incorporate social services into their delivery of healthcare services to disadvantaged youth with asthma and their families.

"Most of our families live on one income and receive governmental support, such as Medi-Cal and food stamps. Some of the issues my clients face is lack of health insurance, a medical home (by which we mean a primary clinic and doctor to manage their care), and poor living environments. We try to address any social issues when we go out to the home, such as screening for domestic violence, issues directly affecting asthma, such as mold, and working with the landlords to correct any potential deficiencies."

Medical social workers who work for public health departments focus more on preventative care than medical social workers in hospital settings. "Our job is very different from that of medical social workers in a hospital because we do not deal with emergency situations," Ms. Silva explained, "We focus more on prevention and education. We are also very specialized."

PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL WORK

- Principle of Confidentiality
- Principle of Non-Preferential Treatment
- Principle of Self-Determination
- Principle of Individualization
- Principle of Acceptance
- Principle of Non-Judgmental Attitude
- Principle of Operating Within the Limits of Agency Functions and Competence
- Principle of Starting Where the Client Is
- Principle of Self-Understanding
- Principle of Honesty
- Principle of Getting Professional Training
- Principle of Value and Action

- Principle of Making Social Services Accessible
- Principles of Managing, Learning, and Managing Change
- Principle of Realizing Social Solutions
- Principle of Finding an Adequate Solution
- Principle of Hope
- Principle of Rational Thought
- Principle of the Locus of Practice
- Principle of Autonomy
- Principle of Immediacy
- Principle of Transferable Learning
- Principle of Motivation
- Principle of giving advice, guidance, and direction
- Principles of Genuineness and Transparency
- Principles of Security and Stability

(Iwarimie-Jaja, 2013)

Conclusion

Medical social work is a demanding profession, and medical social workers typically combine a strong understanding of clinical social work practices and modalities (such as psychosocial assessments, crisis interventions, and psychotherapy) with knowledge of medical environments and protocols. However, many medical social workers refer to the relationships they build with patients, families, and the medical team, combined with the knowledge that they are helping individuals, as reasons they entered and have stayed in the field.

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