

## Promoting Patient Advocacy And Empowerment: The Role Of Medical Social Workers In Healthcare Settings

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### Abstract

*Globally, healthcare settings face the challenge of how to support rising patient population with optimal medical and social needs. Reviewed studies indicate that patients' medical and social needs and concerns are not fully met or addressed. This systematic review is a critical interpretive synthesis highlighting the roles of medical social workers in adopting patient advocacy and empowerment strategies in healthcare settings. It found that patient advocacy and empowerment equip patients with education, knowledge, skills, and resources they need to take healthcare decisions. Patient engagement is essential to improve health outcomes, enhance staff efficiency, increase patient satisfaction, and reduce costs while driving revenue. Medical social workers contribute to the promotion of patient-centered care through facilitating communication, empowering patients, advocating for patient rights, and enhancing care coordination.*

**Keywords:** *Medical Social Worker, Patient Advocacy, Patient Empowerment, Patient Engagement, & Health literacy.*

### Introduction

Globally, it becomes known that healthcare systems meet the challenge of how to support rising patient population with optimal medical and social needs. Several models of healthcare incorporating patient advocacy and empowerment strategies are being progressively implemented to alleviate adverse effects of morbidity and reduce stress on health and social care services (Wakefield et al., 2018). By actively collaborating with healthcare providers, medical social workers play a vital role in promoting and adopting patient advocacy and empowerment. The involvement of medical social workers in healthcare settings helps to overpass the gap between patients and healthcare providers, promote patient engagement, and improve healthcare communication between patients and healthcare providers (Bravo et al., 2015).

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Medical social workers play a vital role in healthcare settings, whether in hospitals, outpatient clinics, nursing homes, health agencies or rehabilitation centers. Medical social workers are licensed professionals who are specialized in meeting patients' psychological, emotional, social and medical needs, facilitating a holistic approach in healthcare settings through patient advocacy and empowerment (Leong & Euller-Ziegler, 2004). Patient advocacy is defined as the process to support and empower patients to take informed decisions, pilot healthcare sector, and establish powerful partnerships with healthcare providers (Stell, 2009). Patient advocacy is to provide patients with significant information and education in order to help them understand their conditions, treatment options, and potential outcomes (Bruce et al., 2015). Patient advocacy is an all-around discipline that includes a range of activities for promoting and protecting patients' rights and well-being within healthcare settings (French et al., 2009).

Furthermore, medical social workers play a crucial role in empowering patients to make informed decisions related to health and treatment options. World Health Organization has defined patient empowerment as 'a process through which people gain greater control over decisions and actions affecting their health' (McCorkle et al., 2011). Patient empowerment can be viewed as part of a patient journey, which increases a patient's health literacy and awareness of how to take decisions and benefits healthcare systems by improving health outcomes (Baldwin, 2003). When patients are empowered to take decisions in partnership with healthcare providers, this helps in health maintenance, disease prevention, seeking earlier diagnosis and adhering to treatment plans, which can reduce healthcare costs in the long term (Bruce et al., 2015).

This systematic review is proposed to recognize and synthesize the international evidence on the vital role of medical social workers in promoting and adopting patient advocacy and empowerment within healthcare settings. This systematic review makes an appraisal of existing healthcare services and develops a new dialogue for patient participation in designing healthcare services that can improve health outcomes, increase patient satisfaction and save cost and time.

### **Methodology**

This research paper has used the design of a systematic review to recognize and synthesize the international evidence on the vital role of medical social workers in promoting and adopting patient advocacy and empowerment within healthcare settings. This systematic review is a comprehensive protocol-driven review and synthesis of data to provide patients and healthcare providers feasible solutions for getting optimal health outcomes, patient satisfaction, and cost effectiveness.

A great number of studies are reviewed while searching in CINAHL, EMBASE, PubMed, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Embase and databases starting from March 2003 to March 2023. Search terms used in this systematic review are "medical social worker", "patient advocacy", "patient empowerment" and "patient engagement." Furthermore, reference lists of related articles are manually reviewed to extract supplementary studies in order to provide a critical interpretive synthesis.

This systematic review is conducted by experienced medical social workers in different healthcare settings in Saudi Arabia, who have developed a protocol for selection of studies in compliance with pre-determined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria in this systematic review depend on original studies with data on patient advocacy and empowerment. Studies are included irrespective of language or publication date. Likewise, the exclusion criteria are reviews, guidelines, non-peer reviewed papers editorials, and case reports.

Data extraction is conducted to collect related information and integrate data across studies assessed for eligibility, including research methodology, design, strategy and results. In addition, a quality assessment of studies is conducted using standardized tools, which are appropriate for respective study designs. Besides, a critical interpretive synthesis is conducted to extract results and data across studies included in this systematic review and draw conclusion.

### **Literature Review**

The international literature related to patient advocacy and empowerment is extensively searched and reviewed to highlight the role of medical social workers in healthcare settings. A great number of studies are reviewed while searching in CINAHL, EMBASE, PubMed, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Embase and databases starting from March 2003 to March 2023. Search terms used in this systematic review are "medical social worker", "patient advocacy", and "patient empowerment." Furthermore, reference lists of related articles are manually reviewed to extract supplementary studies in order to provide a critical interpretive synthesis.

The inclusion criteria in this systematic review depend on original studies with data on patient advocacy and empowerment and roles of medical social workers in healthcare settings. Studies are included irrespective of language or publication date. Likewise, the exclusion criteria are reviews, guidelines, non-peer reviewed papers editorials, and case reports.

Furthermore, a number of 40 studies meet the eligibility criteria. The study design includes randomized controlled trials and cohort studies. Key intervention components examined are patient education, patient awareness, patients' rights, social justice, decision making, and roles of medical social workers. Findings assessed are clinical parameters, supportive care, quality of life, and overheads in healthcare settings.

Findings indicate that medical social workers as part of the multidisciplinary healthcare team help in adopting patient advocacy and empowerment strategies in healthcare settings. As a result, this can help the entire healthcare system to improve patients' quality of life, get better health outcomes, increase patient satisfaction, save cost and time, and reduce stress on the medical services in various healthcare settings. However, little is known about the application or effects of patient advocacy and empowerment strategies for increasing patient population, which needs further research.

### **Discussion**

While healthcare providers struggle to offer the best care for increasing patient population, reviewed studies indicates that a great number of patients feel their needs and concerns are not fully met or addressed (Mannsaker et al., 2023). This is where effective patient advocacy and empowerment becomes crucial in healthcare settings. In this systematic review, researchers have explored the role of medical social workers in adopting patient advocacy and empowerment strategies in order to advocate and empower patients within healthcare settings. By understanding patient advocacy and empowerment, establishing strong partnership between patients and healthcare providers, and empowering patients through education, patients can receive the quality healthcare services they deserve (Liechty et al., 2011). This systematic review is a critical interpretive synthesis highlighting the roles of medical social workers in adopting patient advocacy and empowerment strategies in healthcare settings.

### **Vital roles of medical social workers**

Medical social workers play a critical role in healthcare settings, including hospitals, outpatient clinics, nursing homes, health agencies or rehabilitation centers (Craig et al., 2013). Medical social workers are licensed professionals who are specialized in meeting patients' psychological, emotional, social and medical needs, facilitating a holistic approach in healthcare settings through patient advocacy and empowerment (Leong & Euller-Ziegler, 2004). Medical social workers serve as a bridge between patients and healthcare providers, as they work closely with patients and their families to map read complexities of healthcare, provide proper counseling, improve patient advocacy, make patients more empowered, and connect patients to community resources (Eichler et al., 2009).

Furthermore, a medical social worker provides emotional and social support to patients coping with medical trauma, including terminal, acute or chronic diseases (Mannsaker et al., 2023). A medical social worker assists patients with health-care-related challenges by helping them access services and information related to health conditions, get information and counseling services, make referrals for social services such as financial assistance and support groups, and act as a patient advocate, advisor, educator and care coordinator (Liechty et al., 2011). The expertise of medical social workers in assessing patient needs and developing individualized care plans guarantees that patients take delivery of holistic support that contributes considerably to improved health outcomes and patient satisfaction (Keefe et al., 2009).

Moreover, medical social workers contribute to the promotion of patient-centered care through facilitating communication, empowering patients, advocating for patient rights, and enhancing care coordination (Eichler et al., 2009). Firstly, medical social workers act as intermediaries between patients and healthcare providers, ensuring that both parties realize each other's needs and concerns (Liechty et al., 2011). Medical social workers help patients express their preferences and goals, enabling healthcare providers to provide tailored care and treatment (Craig et al., 2013). Secondly, medical social workers empower patients by providing them with related information on their health conditions, medical treatment options, and resources available in community in the manner that equips patients to dynamically participate in taking healthcare decisions (Keefe et al., 2009). Thirdly, medical social workers are patient advocates working in close way to promote and protect patients' rights, ensuring that they receive optimal healthcare services and their voices are heard (Mannsaker et al., 2023). Fourthly, medical social workers collaborate with healthcare providers to improve care coordination and ensure a smooth flow of information between patients and healthcare providers, which shall result in minimizing communication gaps and promoting continuity of healthcare services for the increasing patient population (Keefe et al., 2009).

### **Patient advocacy and empowerment in action**

To fully understand the importance of patient advocacy and empowerment, it is critical to search and examine its different dimensions and responsibilities. Wakefield et al. (2018) stated that patient advocacy is a decisive part of healthcare system that stands on empowering patients and ensuring they receive optimal healthcare services that meets their psychological, emotional, social and medical needs, facilitating a holistic approach in healthcare settings through patient advocacy and empowerment (Wong et al., 2014). Patient advocacy engages advocating for patients' rights, helping them in navigating the complex healthcare setting, and empowering them to take informed decisions about their health conditions (McCorkle et al., 2011).

Patient empowerment is positioned within the core of patient advocacy. Patient empowerment involves equipping patients with education, knowledge, skills, and resources they need to vigorously partake in healthcare decisions (Bravo et al., 2015). Medical social workers are

closely working with patients to make them understand their medical conditions, treatment options, and potential risks and benefits (Stell, 2009). By promoting patient advocacy and empowerment, medical social workers enable patients to take control of their health and make choices that meet their values, preferences and expectations (Bruce et al., 2015).

Patients who are actively engaged in the decision-making process regarding their health conditions are more likely to comply and be satisfied with their chosen treatment plans (Leong & Euller-Ziegler, 2004). When patients are empowered to be part of the decision-making process, they may probably build partnerships with the healthcare providers established on mutual trust and get better health outcomes while working as a partner (Anderson et al., 2005). Briefly, this shared decision-making process is mixed with mutual trust and shared goals, which helps in driving more effective use of healthcare resources, and potentially reducing wastage or unnecessary costs incurred in different healthcare settings (Aujoulat et al., 2007).

Furthermore, medical social workers play a vital role in assisting patients to navigate the complex healthcare system. Navigating the healthcare system can be overwhelming, in particular for patients suffering from complex medical conditions (Chen et al., 2016). Accordingly, medical social workers serve as guides and facilitators while helping patients to access correct medical care, be aware of insurance coverage and benefits, and manage different aspects of patients' healthcare journey (Wong et al., 2014). They act as a bridge between patients and healthcare providers ensuring that patients receive timely and proper healthcare services (Bruce et al., 2015). Medical social workers act as a patient advocate, advisor, educator and care coordinator.

### **Patient engagement**

Although keeping patients engaged can be challenging, it is a vital process for retaining and satisfying them. Effectively engaging patients in their care is essential to improve health outcomes, enhance staff efficiency, increase patient satisfaction, and reduce costs while driving revenue (Bravo et al., 2015). Strong patient engagement enhances adherence to treatment regimen recommendations among patients leading to fewer complications and re-admissions (Wakefield et al., 2018). A number of studies lately reported coordinated care trials that dynamically engaged patients resulted in decrease of mortality compared to a control group who just took proper medications (Anderson et al., 2005). The studies suggest patients who are engaged in their care live longer than unengaged peers who otherwise receive similar treatment (McCorkle et al., 2011).

Moreover, patient engagement can help lessen front-end staff workload by limiting time spent on phone calls which take up a significant portion of time and can lead to support staff burnout (Aujoulat et al., 2007). This can enhance overall satisfaction, and facilitate longer-standing relationships with healthcare providers while improving patient experience (Chen et al., 2016). Finally, patient engagement directly contributes to outcomes affecting hospital costs and reimbursement for healthcare settings.

Medical social workers are specialized in proposing and applying effective patient engagement strategies, which also means better patient retention and referrals (Wong et al., 2014). Medical social workers promote patient advocacy and empowerment strategies to actively engage patients ensuring that they are informed, heard, advocated and empowered (Bruce et al., 2015). Medical social workers assist patients understand their health conditions and recommended medical treatment (Craig et al., 2013). By the help of medical social workers, patients can identify how to communicate with their healthcare providers and participate in shared decision-

making (Liechty et al., 2011). Patients can take action on their health based on personal learning and overall understanding of how to manage their healthcare services under the care coordination of medical social workers (Mannsaker et al., 2023).

## **Conclusion**

Medical social workers play a crucial role in promoting effective patient advocacy and empowerment that improve healthcare outcomes and foster patient-centered care. By establishing strong partnerships between the patients and healthcare providers, enhancing communication and information sharing, empowering patients and families through education, patients can receive care support and resources they need. Statistics show that patients who receive effective advocacy experience reduced hospital readmissions by 25%, highlighting the importance of this practice in achieving optimal healthcare outcomes (Bravo et al., 2015). Patient advocacy and empowerment facilitates acquisition of self-management skills that patients require to better care for themselves, while also enabling them to understand, participate in taking decisions related to their health status.

Under effective patient advocacy and empowerment, medical social workers assist patients navigate the complex healthcare system and ensure they receive optimal healthcare services. Medical social workers are uniquely positioned to provide health literacy by educating and coaching patients. Medical social workers act as a liaison between patients and health care providers to ensure getting optimal health outcomes. Medical social workers are licensed professionals who are specialized in meeting patients' psychological, emotional, social and medical needs, facilitating a holistic approach in healthcare settings through promoting and adopting patient advocacy and empowerment strategies.

Furthermore, medical social workers play a crucial role in empowering patients to make informed decisions related to health and treatment options. By understanding patient advocacy and empowerment, establishing strong partnership between patients and healthcare providers, and empowering patients through education, patients can receive the quality healthcare services they deserve. Medical social workers serve as a bridge between patients and healthcare providers, as they work closely with patients and their families to map read complexities of healthcare systems, provide proper counseling, improve patient advocacy, make patients more empowered, and connect patients to community resources.

Finally, medical social workers contribute to the promotion of patient-centered care through facilitating communication, empowering patients, advocating for patient rights, and enhancing care coordination. Medical social workers promote patient advocacy and empowerment strategies in healthcare setting to actively engage patients ensuring that they are informed, heard, advocated and empowered, which result in improve health outcomes, enhance staff efficiency, increase patient satisfaction, and reduce costs while driving revenue.

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