

Medical Social Work Practice during Covid-19: An Introspective Analysis by a Medical Social Worker from India

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Abstract

Medical Social Work (MSW) is an essential profession in major speciality hospitals in India. The role plays a crucial by providing psychosocial intervention and patient case management service. The emergence of the Covid – 19 pandemic has put Medical Social Work practice under severe stress and strain. Observing social and physical distancing is a great challenge while carrying out the practice. It caused either partial or complete cessation of regular social work practice and leaving an ethical dilemma. However, the dynamic Covid- 19 circumstances opened many opportunities to learn and practice new role in the form of *Coordinating Patient Intake-Process, Frontline Social Work, Online Medical Social Work* and part of *Covid-19 vaccination team*. The new roles have increased the workload and lead to quarantine and isolation often. All these volatile situations might lead to *work-life balance* issues as well. The stagnation of academic and professional development activities due to Covid-19 is a real loss for the profession.

Keywords: Covid- 19, Medical Social Work Practice, Patient Case Management, Frontline Worker, Professional and Academic Development, Work-life balance

Introduction

Medical Social Work (MSW) practice right now is on a low note due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is an essential service in hospitals, especially specialty tertiary hospitals in which psychosocial interventions are carried out to patients, families, and communities to overcome the illness-related Bio-Psycho-Social and Economic challenges suffered during or post-treatment. However, the present Covid- 19 pandemic, reported in India on January 27, 2020 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021), since then the Medical Social Work practice are being restricted either partially or completely in many hospitals.

Abrupt discontinuing of MSW Practice

The normal course of Medical Social Work- Practices carried out in a tertiary hospital are *patient intake, crisis-intervention, socio-economic assessment, psychosocial interventions,*

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treatment planning, case management with a multidisciplinary team, discharge planning and rehabilitation. All these processes require one to one contact with the patient, need multiple sessions and usually happens in a closed environment. The difficulty of maintaining adequate physical and social distancing while practising has become a serious concern for Medical Social Worker in many circumstances. It has been noted that the use of mask and face shields seems to be preventing effective communication between MSWs and patients. Hence, it results in a reduction in the efficiency of Medical Social Work practices.

Unknown and Known Patients and Occupational Hazard

During the intake process majority of the patients are unaware of their Covid-19 status. Though the patients are being screened for Covid-19 before the intake process, the actual status of Covid-19 is not at all possible to determine. This create circumstance to MSWs to getting infected by the virus. On the other hand, the known status of the patient is giving some freedom to the medical social workers to take appropriate action along with the multidisciplinary team before it spread. These circumstances lead the Medical Social Worker to minimize the normal Medical Social Work Practice and resort to providing only very essential services to the patients. The lack of providing psychosocial intervention affects the recovery process of the patient and also may increase the hospitalization days. These circumstances create an ethical dilemma among Medical Social Workers (MSWs) of not being able to attend to a patient when the patient is in need.

Closure of Hospitals

The closure of hospitals either partially or completely was a common phenomenon at the beginning stage of the Covid – 19 pandemics. The unexpected closure of hospitals created a panic situation among the patient and health professionals alike. It created sudden discharge or transfer of patients to family or another hospital. This scenario resulted in breaking the ongoing medical interventions and postponing planned procedures indefinitely. This was a real testing time for the Medical Social Workers to execute discharge planning amidst the midway of the treatment.

Online Medical Social Work Practice

The applicability of the online mode of Medical Social Work services is tested here. The project started as a pilot activity to reach out to the patients and family members in need of psychosocial supports. A team of Medical Social Workers are appointed for this purpose.

This mode is being widely used for patients who need regular psychosocial supports for recovery. It got wide acceptance from both patients as well as hospital management as it nullified the problem of social and physical distancing while doing the MSW practice.

Frontline - Medical Social Workers

The frontline Covid- 19 workers is the need of the hour in many hospitals. For that, the first choice for many hospitals is to pull out the Medial Social Workers into Covid- 19 prevention team. The new role is to coordinate the Covid- 19 screening of patient and caregivers at outpatient departments (OPDs) and observe the Covid-19 triage protocol. It is a tedious process in which every patient coming to the hospital are being screened with the help of a questionnaire and predict the probability of Covid- 19. Therefore, it is a testing time for the frontline medical social worker to be vigilant while dealing with each patient. The process of screening is going on still in many hospitals.

Pre- Vaccine Counselling (PVC)

The introduction of the Covid- 19 vaccine seems to be an elixir for all health workers, Many Hospitals formed a vaccine team including Medial Social Workers to roll out vaccination drive. The appointed Medial Social Workers are assigned to perform Pre- Vaccine Counselling (PVC) to beneficiaries. The Pre Vaccine Counselling (PVC) aims to reduce the vaccine hesitancy among the beneficiaries and provides confidence to receive the jab. Approximately two hundred pre-vaccine counselling sessions are being rendered per day and expected to increase further in the coming days.

Retarded Academic and Professional Development

One of the main setbacks that have been faced by the Medical Social Work fraternity might be the retardation of academic as well as professional development. Many planned programs were cancelled or postponed over the last year. Seminar, conferences, workshops, training programs, postgraduate and graduate internships are some of them. Suspension of regular academic class and related activities were lost for the Medical Social Work trainees forever. The implementation of the online class comes in handy for theoretical teaching purposes, but being a practice-oriented profession, the loss of practical exposure would result in negativity in their academic and professional development. Probably those who have opted for Health Social Worker as specialization might be the highest suffers due to the lack of internship opportunities as of now.

Complexities on Work-Life –Balance

Medical Social Workers are termed as the *shocked absorbers* of the hospital. They are dealing with highly sensitive human beings; such as outpatients and inpatients. Although the Covid-19 pandemics decreased the regular Medical Social Work practice but increased the workload of the Medical Social Worker manifold as engaged in the new role and patients concerns poured in over phone calls and other modes. The overloaded telephonic consultation with patient and caregivers are being a stressful job for the medical social workers. On the other hand, the personal life of Medical Social Workers went deserted or compromised many times by Covid-19. Quarantine and isolation became part and parcel of MSWs these days. It results in a reduction in social engagement and leading to loneliness. It greatly affected family relationships leading to emotional strain. These circumstances were highly intimidating and capable of destroying the work-life balance of MSWs (Gagnano & Simbula, 2020).

Conclusion

Medical Social Work is a challenging profession. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed Medical Social Work practice to a more exciting level. Hospital administration has been heavily using the skills and knowledge of Medical Social Workers for developing and implementing Covid-19 appropriate patient management methods to have a smooth functioning of the hospitals. Despite all these, the Covid – 19 pandemic situation has brought new thinking in Medical Social Work practice. Inventing new ideas (online Medical Social Work) and performing new roles are some of them. However, the benefit of such kind of practice is yet to be determined as it lacks several components which are essential for a Medical Social Worker practice such as confidentiality, privacy empathy etc.

The academic and professional development of trainees and the practitioners were a great loss owing to Covid-19. There are several occasion internship request of Social Work Schools were turned down by many hospital settings owing to Covid -19. Nevertheless, online sessions organized by Schools of Social Work with Medical Social Work Practitioners seem to be effective though lacking practical exposure. The need for such sort initiation is need of the hour to reduce the gap between theory and practice, although it lacks practical exposure. The online seminars were very productive to the Medical Social Workers' to share their experience with a wider audience and get a reflection on it.

It is high time for the Medical Social Workers to develop a Covid-19 appropriate practice model to address the present challenges. It needs research and deliberations. The new

model should be Evidence-Based (EB) (Bellamy, Bledsoe, & Traube, 2006) and applicable in a variety of pandemic situation. So, Medical Social Workers (MSWs) should prepare themselves to bring new ideas out to overcome the ongoing situation and to secure everyone's quality of life (QOL) (WHO, 2021). The work-life issues of MSWs must be addressed to normalise their mental health and to reduce burn out. The ongoing Covid- 19 vaccination drive would increase the health workers' self-confidence to deliver duty without much agony and reduce work-life balance issues.

Note:- All the views expressed here based on the professional experience of the author.

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