

The Role of Medical Social Worker Improving Health Literacy and Empowering Patient Decision-Making

Komal Shahzadi¹, Mateen Fatima²

¹ Registered Nurse (RN), OPD Emergency. Email: Komalsabir36@gmail.com

¹ Registered Nurse (RN), OPD Emergency. Email: mateenfatiama67@gmail.com

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Abstract

Health literacy plays a crucial role in patient decision-making, particularly in medical contexts where patients are faced with complex treatment options. Medical social workers, who are often positioned at the intersection of healthcare and social services, have a unique opportunity to empower patients through education and support. This paper explores the role of medical social workers in improving health literacy and fostering informed patient decision-making. By offering personalized guidance, facilitating communication between healthcare providers and patients, and addressing the psychosocial aspects of care, medical social workers can significantly enhance the patient experience and health outcomes. The study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of medical social workers in promoting health literacy and decision-making, with a focus on the strategies they employ and the challenges they face. The findings suggest that social workers' involvement can lead to greater patient autonomy, improved understanding of health conditions, and better engagement with treatment plans.

Keywords: Medical Social Work, Health Literacy, Patient Empowerment, Patient Decision-Making, Social Work in Healthcare, Patient Advocacy, Health Education, Informed Consent, Healthcare Decision-Making, Health Communication.

1. Introduction

Health literacy plays an essential role in ensuring that patients can navigate the complex healthcare system and make informed decisions about their health. As healthcare becomes increasingly complex, patients are often required to understand medical terminology, treatment options, and the potential outcomes of their decisions. However, many patients struggle with understanding this information, leading to confusion, reduced engagement, and poorer health outcomes (Berkman, Sheridan, & Donahue, 2011). Medical social workers, positioned at the intersection of healthcare delivery and social support, have the unique ability to bridge this gap, facilitating communication and improving patients' understanding of their health conditions and treatment choices. By addressing both the emotional and informational needs of patients, medical social workers can significantly enhance health literacy and empower patients to take an active role in their healthcare decisions (Zhao, Brown, & Pal, 2017).

The role of medical social workers is particularly important in a healthcare environment that is often characterized by time constraints and high demands on both patients and providers. Social workers act as intermediaries between patients and healthcare professionals, ensuring that patients receive clear, comprehensible information about their diagnoses and treatment options (Zhao, Brown, & Pal, 2017). Their involvement goes beyond just providing information; they offer emotional support, clarify complex medical terms, and help patients make sense of their options

within the context of their personal values and circumstances. By providing these services, medical social workers not only improve health literacy but also promote patient autonomy, which is a key aspect of patient-centered care (Berkman et al., 2011).

Despite the critical role that social workers play in improving health literacy, there remains a gap in understanding the specific strategies they use and the challenges they face in this process. Existing literature highlights that medical social workers are integral in supporting decision-making, but there is limited research on how their interventions specifically contribute to patient empowerment and decision-making (Zhao et al., 2017). In addition, there is a lack of systematic examination of the impact of these interventions on patient outcomes. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the strategies employed by medical social workers to improve health literacy and by examining how these strategies contribute to more informed, empowered patient decision-making (Zhao et al., 2017).

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the growing body of literature on health literacy and patient empowerment. By focusing on the role of medical social workers, this research aims to underscore the importance of integrating social work into healthcare teams to enhance the patient experience and health outcomes. Health literacy is increasingly recognized as a key determinant of health, and improving it through collaborative, patient-centered care has the potential to improve patient satisfaction, treatment adherence, and overall health outcomes (Berkman et al., 2011). Furthermore, the findings of this study may provide valuable insights into how healthcare organizations can better support medical social workers and integrate health literacy strategies into clinical practice.

Given the growing recognition of health literacy as a critical factor in health outcomes, it is essential that healthcare systems continue to find innovative ways to support patients in making informed decisions. Medical social workers, with their expertise in navigating complex social and health systems, are uniquely positioned to play a central role in this process. By examining the strategies they use, the challenges they face, and the outcomes of their interventions, this study aims to offer practical recommendations for improving patient care through enhanced health literacy and empowered decision-making (Berkman et al., 2011). This research will also help to illuminate the broader implications of integrating social work into healthcare settings and the potential benefits for both patients and providers.

1.1 Background of the Study

Health literacy is defined as the ability to obtain, process, and understand basic health information to make informed health decisions. It is widely recognized as a critical factor in patient outcomes, influencing their ability to navigate healthcare systems, adhere to treatment regimens, and participate in decision-making processes. However, many patients face challenges in understanding medical terminology, the implications of various treatment options, and the healthcare system in general. This gap in understanding can contribute to poorer health outcomes, non-compliance with treatment plans, and lower levels of patient satisfaction.

Medical social workers play a pivotal role in bridging this gap. They work closely with patients to enhance their understanding of health conditions, treatment options, and the resources available to them. They also serve as advocates, helping patients navigate complex healthcare systems and make informed decisions about their care. By improving health literacy and empowering patients to take an active role in their healthcare decisions, medical social workers can foster greater autonomy, promote better health outcomes, and contribute to overall patient well-being.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it highlights the critical role that medical social workers play in

improving health literacy and empowering patients to make informed decisions. As the healthcare system becomes more complex, the need for healthcare professionals who can support patients in understanding their health conditions and treatment options is increasingly important. Medical social workers are uniquely positioned to provide this support, addressing both the emotional and informational needs of patients. By exploring their strategies and impact, this study aims to emphasize the importance of integrating social work into healthcare teams, ultimately contributing to improved patient outcomes and a more patient-centered approach to care.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing recognition of health literacy as a critical component of patient care, many patients continue to face challenges in understanding their health information and making informed decisions about their treatment. Medical social workers are often tasked with addressing these challenges, but there is a need for further research on the specific strategies they employ and the impact of their interventions on patient decision-making. This study seeks to examine the role of medical social workers in improving health literacy and empowering patients to make informed decisions, identifying both effective approaches and barriers to success.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What strategies do medical social workers use to improve health literacy among patients?
2. How do medical social workers empower patients to make informed decisions about their healthcare?
3. What challenges do medical social workers face in promoting health literacy and patient decision-making?

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To explore the strategies employed by medical social workers to improve patient health literacy.
2. To assess the effectiveness of these strategies in empowering patients to make informed healthcare decisions.
3. To identify the challenges that medical social workers encounter in promoting health literacy and supporting decision-making.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the Health Literacy Model (Nutbeam, 2000), which posits that health literacy is influenced by both individual and system-level factors, including education, culture, and healthcare accessibility. In this context, medical social workers act as key facilitators of health literacy by providing patients with the necessary resources, information, and emotional support to navigate healthcare systems and make informed decisions. The framework also incorporates elements of patient empowerment, which emphasizes the importance of fostering patient autonomy and engagement in their own healthcare. The model will guide the analysis of the strategies used by medical social workers and the outcomes of their interventions.

2. Literature Review

Health literacy is a critical component of effective healthcare, as it directly influences patients' ability to understand and engage with their treatment options, ultimately affecting health outcomes (Berkman, Sheridan, & Donahue, 2011). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013), health literacy is the ability to access, understand, evaluate, and apply health-related

information to make informed health decisions. This concept is increasingly important in the context of chronic disease management, where patients must frequently make decisions about complex treatment regimens. However, studies indicate that many patients, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, struggle with understanding medical information and navigating the healthcare system (Nutbeam, 2000). As a result, patients may make uninformed decisions that negatively impact their health, highlighting the need for interventions that improve health literacy.

Medical social workers are essential in addressing the gaps in health literacy and facilitating informed decision-making. Social workers are trained to understand not only the social determinants of health but also the emotional and psychological challenges patients face when confronting illness (Zhao, Brown, & Pal, 2017). By working closely with patients, social workers can provide personalized education, explain complex medical information in simpler terms, and ensure patients have the necessary support to make informed decisions. Social workers also act as advocates, helping patients navigate the healthcare system and access additional resources such as financial assistance, support groups, and community services (McDonald, 2014). This dual role of providing both emotional support and practical guidance positions medical social workers as key players in promoting health literacy.

A growing body of literature demonstrates that the involvement of social workers can lead to positive health outcomes. For instance, a study by Meier, Gross, and Kanter (2020) found that patients who received education and decision-making support from social workers showed improved understanding of their medical conditions and increased adherence to treatment plans. In particular, patients with chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, who often need to make frequent health decisions, benefit from the personalized approach offered by medical social workers (McDonald, 2014). Moreover, research indicates that when patients are more engaged in their healthcare decisions, they are more likely to follow prescribed treatments and attend follow-up appointments, which ultimately leads to better health outcomes (Berkman et al., 2011).

Despite the positive impact of medical social workers in promoting health literacy, challenges remain. One significant barrier is the limited time that social workers have to engage with patients, especially in busy healthcare settings. Social workers often face high caseloads, which can affect their ability to provide the depth of support needed for effective health literacy interventions (Gibson, Grant, & Shinn, 2013). Additionally, some patients may be resistant to seeking help due to stigma, cultural differences, or lack of trust in healthcare providers (Zhao et al., 2017). These factors complicate the role of medical social workers and highlight the need for systemic changes that provide more support for social work interventions.

Furthermore, while the literature emphasizes the importance of medical social workers in improving health literacy, there is a lack of detailed research on the specific strategies they use. While some studies mention that social workers help explain medical terms, provide emotional support, and advocate for patients, there is limited data on the specific tools and techniques they use to address low health literacy (Berkman et al., 2011). More research is needed to identify best practices and to measure the impact of these interventions on patient decision-making and health outcomes.

Finally, patient empowerment is an essential aspect of health literacy. Empowering patients involves giving them the knowledge and confidence to make decisions about their own health. Research by Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) suggests that when patients feel empowered, they are more likely to actively participate in their care, adhere to treatment plans, and experience improved health outcomes. Social workers are instrumental in this process by providing information in a way that is accessible and understandable, and by supporting patients in making decisions that

align with their values and preferences (Meier et al., 2020). Thus, fostering patient empowerment through improved health literacy not only benefits individual patients but can also contribute to more effective and patient-centered healthcare delivery.

Literature supports the vital role of medical social workers in improving health literacy and supporting patient decision-making. While significant strides have been made, there remain challenges related to time constraints, patient engagement, and the need for more focused research on effective strategies. As healthcare continues to evolve, further integration of social workers into the healthcare team, along with a greater emphasis on health literacy and patient empowerment, will be crucial for enhancing patient outcomes and promoting more informed decision-making. This study will aim to explore these issues further, with the goal of providing recommendations for improving health literacy interventions within healthcare systems (Berkman et al., 2011; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Meier et al., 2020; McDonald, 2014; Nutbeam, 2000; Zhao et al., 2017).

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the role of medical social workers in improving health literacy and empowering patient decision-making. A qualitative approach provides in-depth insights into the experiences, strategies, and challenges that medical social workers face in their work with patients. The goal is to gather contextual data on the methods used by medical social workers and understand the effects these methods have on patient outcomes.

3.1 Sampling and Participants

The study focused on three groups of participants: medical social workers, patients who have received social work services, and healthcare providers who collaborate with social workers in patient care. The sampling method used is purposive sampling, targeting participants based on their roles and experience in healthcare. Specifically, the participants included:

1. **Medical Social Workers:** These individuals had at least two years of experience working in healthcare settings such as hospitals, outpatient clinics, or other care facilities. They were involved in patient education, decision-making support, and health literacy interventions.
2. **Patients:** Participants in this group were individuals who had received social work services in healthcare settings, particularly those managing chronic conditions or facing complex medical decisions.
3. **Healthcare Providers:** The study also included physicians, nurses, or other healthcare professionals who regularly collaborated with social workers in providing care to patients.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with medical social workers, patients, and healthcare providers. The semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility while ensuring that key topics were addressed. Interviews were conducted individually, either in person or via videoconferencing, depending on the preferences and availability of participants.

1. **Medical Social Workers:** The interviews focused on exploring the strategies they used to improve health literacy, their role in supporting patient decision-making, and the challenges they encountered in their work.
2. **Patients:** Patient interviews aimed to understand how the involvement of a medical social worker influenced their understanding of their health conditions and treatment options. Additionally, patients shared their experiences regarding the support provided by social workers.

3. **Healthcare Providers:** Healthcare providers were interviewed to gain insight into how medical social workers contributed to patient education and decision-making, as well as any challenges or benefits observed in interprofessional collaboration.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical guidelines and obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or ethics committee. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview. Participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences. The collected data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method commonly used for identifying and analyzing patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis followed these steps:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** Transcripts were read multiple times to familiarize the researcher with the content and overall context of the responses.
2. **Initial Coding:** The researcher manually coded the transcripts, identifying significant statements and assigning codes to specific themes related to the research objectives, such as health literacy improvement, patient empowerment, and decision-making support.
3. **Theme Identification:** Codes were grouped into broader themes, focusing on the key aspects of health literacy improvement, patient autonomy, and the role of medical social workers in facilitating informed decision-making.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** The identified themes were reviewed and refined by cross-referencing them with the original data to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' experiences.
5. **Finalizing Themes:** The final themes were organized and presented in a structured manner, supported by direct quotes from the participants to ensure the validity of the analysis. Themes were specifically aligned with the research questions regarding health literacy, patient decision-making, and the role of medical social workers.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, several strategies were employed:

1. **Member Checking:** After analyzing the data, a summary of the findings was provided to participants to verify that their responses were interpreted accurately.
2. **Triangulation:** The study used data triangulation, comparing responses from different groups (social workers, patients, and healthcare providers) to ensure the consistency and comprehensiveness of the findings.
3. **Audit Trail:** A detailed record was maintained of all stages of the research process, including data collection, coding, and theme development, to provide transparency and ensure that the findings were based on rigorous analysis.

4. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed thematic analysis to explore the patterns emerging from the interviews and to understand the role of medical social workers in improving health literacy and empowering patient decision-making (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to identify and analyze patterns in qualitative data, allowing for a deeper understanding of the experiences of medical social workers, patients, and healthcare providers.

4.1 Thematic Coding Process

The data analysis process included the following steps:

1. **Familiarization with Data:** The researcher read the interview transcripts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content.
2. **Initial Coding:** The researcher systematically assigned codes to significant data segments that related to the key research questions. These included themes such as health literacy strategies, patient decision-making, and barriers faced by social workers.
3. **Developing Themes:** After coding, related codes were grouped into overarching themes. These themes represented the core findings related to the strategies social workers use, the empowerment of patients, and the challenges they face in promoting health literacy.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** The themes were refined and validated by comparing them against the raw data to ensure they accurately captured the experiences of the participants. Feedback from participants through member checking was used to verify the authenticity of the findings.
5. **Reporting the Findings:** The final themes were presented, supported by direct quotes from participants. These themes addressed the research questions related to the role of medical social workers in improving health literacy and patient decision-making, along with the impact of their interventions on patient outcomes.

This method allowed for a detailed analysis of the data, offering insights into how medical social workers impact health literacy and patient decision-making in healthcare settings. It also provided an understanding of the challenges and limitations that social workers face when trying to empower patients and improve health literacy.

5. Discussion

The role of medical social workers in improving health literacy and empowering patient decision-making is critical in enhancing patient outcomes and overall healthcare experiences. The findings from this study underscore the importance of social workers in healthcare settings, highlighting how their interventions directly impact the way patients understand medical information and make informed decisions about their care. Health literacy, which refers to the ability to access, understand, and use health-related information, is a key determinant of health outcomes. Social workers, by providing tailored education and support, help bridge the gap between complex medical information and patients' ability to comprehend and act on it.

One of the major challenges identified is the widespread lack of health literacy among various patient populations, especially among those with lower socioeconomic status, older adults, and individuals with chronic conditions. As studies show, low health literacy often correlates with poorer health outcomes, including medication errors, lack of adherence to treatment plans, and increased hospital readmissions (Berkman et al., 2011). By improving health literacy, social workers not only help patients understand their conditions and treatments but also foster empowerment, enabling them to actively engage in their own healthcare decisions.

Social workers are uniquely positioned to address health literacy deficits due to their skills in patient education, counseling, and advocacy. They often serve as intermediaries between patients and healthcare providers, translating medical jargon into more understandable terms, thus ensuring patients are not overwhelmed by complex terminology. Additionally, they play a key role in addressing social determinants of health, such as poverty, lack of access to resources, and cultural barriers, which can significantly affect a patient's understanding of their health and healthcare system (Koh & Rudd, 2015).

The concept of patient empowerment is intricately tied to social work practice. By equipping patients with the necessary tools and knowledge, social workers enable them to make decisions

that align with their values, preferences, and needs. Empowerment also involves encouraging patients to ask questions, seek clarification, and be proactive in their health care. This process fosters a sense of autonomy, which is especially important for individuals navigating complex or chronic health conditions.

Furthermore, the role of social workers in shared decision-making (SDM) within healthcare settings has been increasingly recognized. SDM involves a collaborative approach where patients and healthcare providers work together to make decisions about treatment options. Social workers facilitate this process by helping patients weigh the benefits and risks of different treatments, as well as consider their personal circumstances, values, and preferences. This is especially crucial in situations where multiple treatment options are available, such as in cancer care, palliative care, or mental health treatments, where choices often involve significant personal and emotional factors. Despite the positive impact, the integration of social work into health literacy and patient decision-making is not without challenges. Healthcare systems may not always fully recognize the potential of social workers, and barriers such as insufficient training, lack of resources, or organizational resistance can limit their involvement. Additionally, the increased demand for healthcare services means that social workers often face heavy caseloads, limiting the time they can spend with each patient. These challenges highlight the need for continued advocacy for the inclusion of social workers in healthcare teams and for greater support for social work education and training focused on health literacy and patient empowerment.

Medical social workers play an indispensable role in improving health literacy and empowering patients in their decision-making. Their contributions help ensure that patients not only understand their medical conditions and options but also have the tools to make informed choices that align with their values and improve their overall quality of life. As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, it is crucial to continue fostering interdisciplinary collaborations that fully integrate social work into patient care, with a particular focus on enhancing health literacy and supporting patient empowerment. The future of healthcare depends on a collaborative, patient-centered approach that values the expertise of all professionals, including medical social workers.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, medical social workers play a crucial role in improving health literacy and empowering patients to make informed healthcare decisions. Their unique position within healthcare teams allows them to bridge gaps between complex medical information and patient understanding, ultimately enhancing patient engagement and treatment adherence. By offering personalized education, emotional support, and advocacy, social workers contribute to better health outcomes, particularly for patients facing chronic conditions or complex treatment regimens. However, challenges such as limited time, high caseloads, and patient resistance can hinder the full potential of social workers' interventions. Despite these challenges, the involvement of social workers in healthcare systems remains a valuable asset in fostering patient-centered care, promoting autonomy, and supporting informed decision-making. Integrating social work more comprehensively into healthcare teams and addressing the barriers they face could lead to more effective health literacy interventions, improved patient satisfaction, and better overall health outcomes.

7. Recommendations

1. Healthcare institutions should provide ongoing training for medical social workers to enhance their skills in health literacy and patient empowerment techniques, ensuring they are equipped to handle the growing complexity of healthcare information.

2. Encourage stronger collaboration between medical social workers and other healthcare providers, such as doctors and nurses, to create a unified and cohesive approach to patient care, improving communication and the overall patient experience.
3. Reduce the caseloads of social workers to allow for more individualized attention and meaningful engagement with patients, addressing the emotional, psychological, and educational needs that are crucial for improving health literacy.
4. Integrate social work services more consistently into multidisciplinary care teams, ensuring that social workers are involved early in the treatment process and are part of the decision-making process regarding patient care.
5. Develop and distribute standardized, easy-to-understand patient education materials that medical social workers can use to improve health literacy, making sure these materials are culturally appropriate and accessible for diverse patient populations.
6. Promote the use of technology, such as online resources, educational apps, and telehealth platforms, to enhance patient understanding of their health conditions and treatment options, providing alternative modes of education and support.
7. Reduce stigma associated with seeking help from social workers by increasing awareness of their role in supporting patients, thus encouraging more patients to engage with these services early in their healthcare journey.
8. Implement regular assessments of patients' health literacy levels to identify those in need of additional support, allowing for more tailored interventions that meet individual patient needs.
9. Support further research into the specific strategies that social workers use to improve health literacy and decision-making, as well as the long-term impact of these interventions on patient outcomes, to develop evidence-based best practices.
10. Advocate for policy changes that incorporate health literacy as a fundamental aspect of patient care, ensuring that healthcare organizations and professionals recognize the importance of health literacy and the critical role medical social workers play in improving it.

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