

The Role of the Social Worker in Educating Patients about Their Rights

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ABSTRACT

Social work is considered a specialized professional field that emerged from human concerns across the world. However, it is a human endeavor that has existed since the emergence of human society in the form of empathy, solidarity, and cooperation among individuals within the community. Social work has undergone various developments over time, evolving into a profession based on scientific principles and methodologies that aim at improving human dignity and welfare. (Abid, 2010, 13). Medical social work is one of the important areas of social work practiced in medical institutions, where the social worker helps the patient benefit from the resources and services of the institution. This enhances the social performance of the patient and highlights the significance of the collaboration between the medical institution and social services to provide optimal medical care for the patient, thus facilitating recovery and improving their social functioning, which ultimately helps both the individual and the community.

Keywords: community, collaboration, scientific, social.

INTRODUCTION

Social work is considered a specialized professional field that emerged from human concerns across the world. However, it is a human endeavor that has existed since the emergence of human society in the form of empathy, solidarity, and cooperation among individuals within the community. Social work has undergone various developments over time, evolving into a profession based on scientific principles and methodologies that aim at improving human dignity and welfare. (Abid, 2010, 13).

Medical social work is one of the important areas of social work practiced in medical institutions, where the social worker helps the patient benefit from the resources and services of the institution. This enhances the social performance of the patient and highlights the significance of the collaboration between the medical institution and social services to provide optimal medical care for the patient, thus facilitating recovery and improving their social functioning, which ultimately helps both the individual and the community.

In essence, social work in medical settings is one of the fields of social work carried out by professional social workers, who are trained to interact with the medical team in order to elevate the role of hospitals and treatment centers in providing distinguished medical services. (Al-Shirani, 2009, 282-283).

The "Patient Rights Document" issued by the Ministry of Health in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stipulates that patients have the right to be informed about the mission of the healthcare facility, and this includes providing the patient with a copy of the Patient Rights Document upon registration or admission to the healthcare facility.

The document includes the patient's rights regarding access to appropriate healthcare services in a timely manner, regardless of race, gender, religion, belief, or origin.

The third clause of the document emphasizes the principle of maintaining the confidentiality of the patient's personal information, diagnosis, tests, treatment, and medical records.

The document also highlights the importance of providing healthcare in a safe and appropriate environment that respects the patient's dignity and health status.

Among the rights listed in the document is the patient's right to refuse the prescribed treatment or any part of it, provided it is in accordance with the applicable laws and regulations, and to be informed of the expected consequences of such refusal.

To ensure the implementation of these rights in practice, the role of the social worker in the healthcare facility is crucial. The social worker must inform the patient about their rights, clarify any concerns they may have, and ensure the patient is well-informed about their health status, particularly when the patient is diagnosed with a chronic or severe illness. The social worker should also follow up on the patient's emotional and psychological well-being, addressing any issues such as anxiety, depression, or fear related to the illness.

Additionally, the social worker is responsible for coordinating with social institutions and engaging with the patient's family to help them understand the patient's rights and support the patient's treatment journey. The

document also outlines the social worker's role in educating patients about their rights and ensuring the proper implementation of these rights.

In this regard, an essential aspect of the social worker's role in healthcare institutions is to assess their performance through surveys or feedback from patients. This feedback helps evaluate the level of care and how well the social worker is fulfilling their duties, ensuring that the services provided align with the hospital's policies and objectives.

However, the document also indicates that the social work services in some Saudi hospitals are still largely seen as administrative or clerical functions, rather than as a fundamental aspect of patient care, which undermines the full potential of social work in these settings.

The social worker's services in the healthcare facility are primarily aimed at the beneficiary, which in this case is the patient. We have designed a special questionnaire to assess the benefits patients gain from the presence of a social worker in the healthcare setting, as well as to gather their opinions on the matter, including their awareness of whether or not the hospital provides these services.

Problem Statement

The emergence of social services in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been linked to the societal, economic, and cultural transformations that have shaped Saudi society. These changes necessitated finding a balance between material and moral transformations, which could only be achieved with the establishment of social services. As a result, social services became an integral part of the state's public welfare system, especially within the Ministry of Health, where the presence of social services in hospitals has proven to be of significant importance in improving patients' sense of well-being. This role is essential in addressing the social and environmental factors that contribute to the illness, and ultimately the patient's inability to perform their social roles.

Social services first emerged in the Ministry of Health hospitals in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where the Ministry established a medical social services department in 1393, affiliated with the General Administration of Health Services. This department was responsible for planning social work activities within the ministry and its healthcare institutions, and for overseeing the activities of social workers. The Ministry began contracting with a number of social workers in various fields, initially focusing on psychiatric and chest hospitals, and later expanded its recruitment of qualified national personnel after the state took a larger role in supporting social services.

Despite the significant efforts of the relevant ministries in advancing social services, the role of social workers remains unclear in many medical institutions. This ambiguity arises either from poor management of social work within the institutions or from a lack of recognition of the importance of the social worker's specialty. As a result, the role of social workers is often limited to tasks that do not reflect their professional expertise, which negatively impacts the performance and effectiveness of social work services in these institutions.

In light of the above, this study aims to explore the reality of the role social workers play in educating patients about their rights, as well as the obstacles that hinder social workers from performing this role effectively. This will be achieved through surveys of social workers themselves, as well as through gathering the opinions of patients regarding the knowledge and impact of the social worker's role in raising awareness of patient rights, as outlined in the regulations, and whether there is a lack of such knowledge

Importance of the Study

YavesMadiot (1976) believes that human rights are "the study of personal rights recognized nationally and internationally, which, within a particular civilization, affirm the dignity of the individual and protect it in life, while maintaining the social order of society" (Madiot, 1976, p. 18).

In this context, the importance of this study arises from its focus on fundamental human rights, specifically the right of patients to receive treatment and comprehensive healthcare that respects their existence as human beings and meets all of their needs as guaranteed by the regulations of the healthcare institution providing the service. The study also highlights the role of the social worker in promoting patient rights awareness and educating patients about these rights. This will be explored through understanding the perspectives of patients on this role, as well as conducting surveys with social workers themselves to assess the actual performance of this role.

Moreover, the significance of the study lies in its objective to identify the most effective ways to enhance the dissemination of human rights culture in a society increasingly concerned with personal dignity and the development of civilized communities. This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing efforts to build a more just and human-centered society through promoting the rights of individuals, especially in healthcare settings.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the reality of the role played by social workers in educating patients about their rights, through the following specific objectives:

- To understand patients' opinions regarding the rights provided to them in the hospital.

- To explore patients' opinions about the role of the social worker and the services they provide in the hospital.
- To identify the obstacles that hinder the performance of social workers in the hospital from the perspective of social workers themselves.
- To examine the opinions of the medical and administrative staff regarding the importance of the social worker's role in the healthcare facility.
- To propose recommendations for improving the quality of services provided to patients by social workers in hospitals, particularly in relation to patient rights, duties, and responsibilities toward the hospital.

Research Questions

The study is centered around the following main question, which this research seeks to answer through its investigation:

- What is the reality of the role played by social workers in educating patients about their rights?
This main question is further divided into several sub-questions:
- To what extent are patients aware of the rights outlined in the Patient Rights Charter issued by the Ministry of Health in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?
- What are patients' opinions about the role of the social worker in the hospital?
- What are the obstacles that hinder social workers from fulfilling their role in healthcare institutions, according to the perspectives of social workers themselves?
- What is the opinion of the medical and administrative staff in the hospital regarding the importance of the social worker's role in the healthcare facility?
- What are the proposed recommendations for improving the quality of services provided to patients by social workers in hospitals, particularly regarding patient rights, duties, and responsibilities toward the hospital?

Methodology of the Study

The researcher used the descriptive analytical approach in this study, as this approach provides detailed data on the study's subject and offers a realistic interpretation of the information related to the topic. This methodology also allows for the prediction of future trends or outcomes based on the collected data.

To achieve the study's objectives, the researcher employed the descriptive analytical approach to assess the extent of social workers' performance in fulfilling their roles regarding patient rights in healthcare institutions. This was done through the perspectives of patients, medical and administrative staff, and social workers themselves, while also identifying the obstacles faced by social workers in performing these roles. One of the tools used for data collection in this study was a questionnaire for social workers.

Concepts and Terminology of the Study

In this study, there are several key terms that the researcher deems necessary to define, including:

Concept of Role

The term "role" refers to a set of expectations regarding the behavior of an individual in a given social situation, as well as the reciprocal expectations from others in the social context. (Hegazy, 1982,79).

It also refers to the practice of social rights and duties within a social position, as well as the standards of social status, represented by symbols and markers of that status. (Omar, 1992, 71)

Definition of Role (Operationally)

The "role" refers to the work performed by the social worker within a medical facility or hospital, specifically providing social assistance to patients. This work is considered critical in ensuring the success of the treatment plan.

Concept of Medical Social Worker

The medical social worker is responsible for all social service operations within a healthcare institution, whether it is within the medical or external environment. This role involves facilitating social change processes, collaborating with the medical team or rehabilitation specialists in the rehabilitation of patients and individuals with disabilities, and ensuring their social adaptation and integration. It also involves working to improve the health conditions in the surrounding environment (Al-Namas, 2000, 43).

Medical social worker

A medical social worker is a specialist in social services who must possess individual traits, professional standards, and the competency required to work effectively across various sectors and fields of social services (Abid&Jodet, 2010, 53).

Based on the above, we can define the medical social worker operationally as follows: The medical social worker is the person specialized in social services, possessing professional competence and standards, who practices their work within healthcare institutions.

Concept of Awareness and Education

In the Contemporary Arabic Dictionary, awareness is defined as understanding and accepting something, retaining it, and reflecting on it. When a person is aware of something, they understand it in its true form. To "make someone aware" means to advise them and guide them toward understanding a particular topic. "Media works to raise public awareness" and "health awareness is essential" (Omar, 2008, p. 2469). In the *Al-Mujam Al-Waseet*, awareness is described as retention, appreciation, understanding, and clear perception (1044). According to IbnManzur in *Lisan al-Arab*, awareness is the act of mentally retaining something. When one is aware of something, they understand, retain, and accept it. Therefore, they are considered "aware" (IbnManzur, 2003, p. 396).

Based on this, awareness can be defined operationally as guiding individuals and communities to recognize a specific matter, understand all its aspects, whether positive or negative, and encouraging them to follow what benefits their personal and public interests.

Concept of Illness and Operational Definition of a Patient

Illness is a state of suffering resulting from disease. From a scientific perspective, illness is considered an unnatural biological pain or mental disorder that causes certain symptoms in a person and requires specific types of care (Omar, 2004, p. 57). Based on the above definition, an operational definition of a patient can be made as a person who suffers from abnormal biological pain or a mental disorder that causes specific symptoms and requires a particular type of medical, psychological, and social care.

Patient's Rights

In the Arabic Language, the term "right" is defined as something firmly established, which cannot be denied or rejected (*Al-Manawi*, 990 AD, p. 143).

Definition of Rights in General

A right is something that is firmly established and recognized by law, granting authority or responsibility to achieve a specific interest (*Al-Taymat*, 2001, p. 26).

Operational Definition of the Patient's Right

The needs of the patient for healthcare services that are legally guaranteed and provided by the healthcare institution.

Previous Studies

Al-Ajilani's Study (2005) titled "Evaluation of Professional Skills Among Social Workers: A Survey Study in Mental Health Hospitals in Saudi Arabia" aimed to assess the nature and content of professional skills among social workers in the mental health field using a professional skills scale. The study also examined the relationship between years of experience in the mental health field and the skill level of the social worker, as well as the connection between age and professional skills among social workers working in mental health hospitals. The study relied on a social survey methodology and included social workers from mental health hospitals in Riyadh, Dammam, and Taif, with a total of 60 participants. The study concluded with several findings as follows:

- The data indicated that most of the study participants possessed strong interpersonal skills when interacting with patients. It was found that the social workers generally had good human relations skills in their dealings with patients.
- The study also revealed that as experience increased, so did the confidence in possessing cognitive skills, human relations skills, role understanding, and intellectual skills. However, it was found that as experience increased, confidence in possessing influence skills decreased.
- The data indicated that most of the study participants possessed role understanding skills when interacting with patients.
- The data also showed that the study participants generally had good intellectual skills in dealing with patients.
- The study found that most participants possessed cognitive skills in dealing with patients.
- The study concluded that females were more aware than males in cognitive skills, human relations skills, role understanding skills, and intellectual skills, while males were more aware of influence skills.

Awad and Nimer (2010) titled "The Reality of Applying the Social Work Profession in the Medical Field and Its Obstacles from the Perspective of Workers in Medical Institutions in Qalqilya and Tulkarm Districts"

This study was conducted in Palestine and aimed to understand the reality of applying the social work profession in the medical field and the obstacles faced, from the perspective of workers in medical institutions in the Qalqilya and Tulkarm districts. The study also sought to determine the effect of variables such as gender, educational qualification, years of experience, profession, and institutional affiliation on the degree of these obstacles. The researchers selected a random sample of 200 workers from medical institutions in both Qalqilya and Tulkarm. To achieve the study's objectives, they developed a tool in the form of a questionnaire to assess the obstacles in applying social work in the medical field. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: The first part included demographic data about the respondents. The second part included items that measure these obstacles, consisting of 32 items distributed across four main areas: Obstacles related to the medical institution and the medical team, Obstacles related to the social worker's qualifications and training, Obstacles related to patients and their families. And obstacles related to the local environment. The study's findings included the following results:

- The average total score for the obstacles in applying the social work profession in the medical field, from the perspective of the workers in the medical institutions in Qalqilya and Tulkarm, was 63.4%, which indicates a moderate level of obstacles. The highest level of obstacles was found in the area of obstacles related to the local environment, followed by obstacles related to patients and their families, then obstacles related to the medical institution and the medical team, with the lowest level of obstacles found in the area related to the social worker's qualifications and training.
- There were no statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level in the degree of obstacles related to the medical institution and the medical team, nor in the obstacles related to the social worker's qualifications and training based on gender. However, the results were in favor of females.
- Statistically significant differences were found at the 0.05 level in the degree of obstacles related to patients and their families between the workers with a diploma and those with a Master's degree or higher, with the results favoring those with a diploma. Also, significant differences were found between those with a Bachelor's degree and those with a Master's degree, favoring the Bachelor's degree holders.
- Statistically significant differences were found at the 0.05 level in the degree of obstacles related to the social worker between those with 1-5 years of experience and those with 6-10 years of experience, with the latter group reporting higher levels of obstacles.
- Statistically significant differences were found at the 0.05 significance level in the overall degree of obstacles to the application of social work in the medical field, favoring medical and administrative staff across all areas. The differences favored administrative staff in the areas involving doctors and administrators, and also between doctors and nurses, with nurses and administrative staff being favored.
- Statistically significant differences were found at the 0.05 significance level in the degree of application of social work in the medical field in areas such as (obstacles related to the medical institution, obstacles related to the protected environment), and in the degree of obstacles related to patients and their families, depending on the institution's affiliation, with differences favoring governmental institutions.
- No statistically significant differences were found at the 0.05 significance level in the degree of obstacles to the application of social work in Palestine from the perspective of workers in medical institutions, depending on the variable of district.

Al-Nofimi et al. (2011), titled "The Reality of Social Work Practice in the Medical Field," is an applied field study conducted on a sample of hospitals under the Ministry of Health in SamtanaAmav. The study aimed to examine the actual role played by the medical social worker in the hospitals of SamtanaAmav and to explore the social needs of patients that require social worker intervention, as well as the challenges faced by social workers in fulfilling their duties. The study also sought to understand the level of awareness of the hospital management and medical staff regarding the importance of the social work role in the hospital. The research relied on a social survey method using a comprehensive sampling technique, targeting four categories of participants, as follows: Patients (male and female) (54), Social workers (male and female) (75), specialists (14), nurses (male and female) 165, Doctors (male and female) (18) and administrative staff (male and female). The study concluded with several results, including identifying the difficulties patients face in benefiting from the services provided to them in the hospital.

- The study highlighted the need for moral and emotional support for patients to accept their health conditions, as well as the demand for material assistance from the hospital. It also identified a lack of care from family members and caregivers, particularly for elderly patients, as well as a lack of medical awareness about the proper procedures to follow within the hospital, and lack of trust in medical treatment.
- Additionally, the study emphasized the role of the social worker in providing the medical team with relevant social information about the patient, and in maintaining communication with the patient's family. The study also noted the importance of encouraging patients to follow through with their treatment and

cooperate with the medical team, including assisting the medical team in identifying the types of assistance required by the patient. Furthermore, the social worker's role in participating in educational seminars and workshops aimed at raising cultural and health awareness among patients and their families was highlighted.

Al-Mohammadi (2013), titled "Evaluation of the Reality of Social Work Services in the Medical Field from the Perspective of Patients" is a field study conducted in the hospitals of Health Affairs in Medina. The study aimed to examine patients' opinions on the services provided to them in the hospitals of Health Affairs in Medina, and to investigate their views on the role of the social worker in the hospital. It also sought to assess patients' opinions on the services provided by the social worker and to explore whether there were any differences in patients' responses regarding the level of evaluation of social work services in medical settings in the hospitals of Health Affairs in Medina, in light of basic patient variables. The study's community and sample consisted of all hospitalized patients in the hospitals of Health Affairs in Medina, totaling (500) patients. The researcher selected a simple random sample of (230) patients. The study followed a descriptive and analytical approach. The study found several key results, as follows:

- The hospital provides comprehensive care that suits my health condition, and I generally find the medical staff at the hospital supportive since my admission. The hospital maintains the confidentiality of patient information, and I have the right to refuse the visit of any person unrelated to providing healthcare services to me. I also have the right to access a report on my health status and the results of medical tests with accuracy and objectivity.
- The social worker understands the patient's need for a companion even after consulting with the treating physician. The social worker discusses special cases of refusal to be treated with the treating doctors. The social worker records my information in approved forms regularly. The social worker works to facilitate communication between the patient and the medical team. The social worker listens to patients' opinions to understand the positive and negative aspects of the services provided at the hospital.
- The social worker clarifies to me their commitment to maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of my information. The social worker provides me with psychological and social support. The social worker consults me about the need for a companion when necessary. The social worker considers the opinions of patients and their companions regarding the medical services provided to them. The social worker always seeks to ensure that I receive the necessary services.

Sand (2013), titled "Evaluating the Role of the Social Worker in Infectious Disease Departments of Public Hospitals from the Patients' Perspective", aimed to evaluate the role of the social worker in the infectious disease departments of public hospitals. This was done by examining the nature of the social worker's role as outlined in the policies and procedures manual for social work services, and comparing it with the role practiced from the patients' perspective, taking into account various personal variables related to the patients. The study also sought to identify the difficulties faced by the social worker in dealing with patients from the social worker's perspective. The study included a sample of (60) patients and (15) social workers, and used a descriptive research methodology, with a questionnaire as the data collection tool. The study concluded with several findings:

- The social worker conducted personal interviews, facilitated communication, emphasized the confidentiality of information, and assisted patients with their problems.
- Difficulties in following up on programs for infectious disease patients and patients' discomfort with administrative and routine procedures during hospital admission.
- The study proposed a suggested approach to address the difficulties faced by the social worker in infectious disease departments.

Commentary on Previous Studies

The previous studies align with the current study in their efforts to derive conclusions regarding the practical and theoretical performance of the medical social worker and to explore the role of the social worker in hospitals through surveys of patients' and social workers' views in the medical field. All previous studies used questionnaires as a data collection tool, as is the case in the current study. Additionally, three of these studies were conducted in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, two of which used the descriptive methodology employed in the current study, while one used the social survey approach.

As for the differences, the current study contrasts with a previous study by measuring the theoretical side of the social worker's role, which used the social survey method. In contrast, the current study focuses on the roles of the social worker in hospitals, the rights of patients that the social worker defends, and the methods used to promote the culture of patient rights and responsibilities toward the medical institution.

The current study also differs from the study by Awad and Nimer in terms of geographical boundaries. The latter study was conducted in Egypt, while the current study was conducted in Saudi Arabia, focusing on the

broader roles of the social worker and their efforts to educate patients about their rights, particularly defending these rights and the obstacles that hinder the social worker's performance in this area.

The study by Noufami also contrasts with the current study in that it was conducted in a different region, while the current study was conducted in Saudi Arabia, using a descriptive and analytical approach, whereas the previous study used the social survey method. Additionally, the current study emphasizes the role of the social worker in advocating for patient rights and assisting patients in accessing appropriate medical services.

The study by Al-Mohammadi is close to the current study but focuses specifically on surveying the views of patients, social workers, and staff members in medical institutions, as well as examining the roles of social workers in the hospital's social service department and the obstacles they face. In contrast, Al-Mohammadi's study solely evaluated the reality of social work services based on patient surveys.

Finally, the study by Sand, the most recent study cited, differs from the current study in that it specifically examines the role of social workers in infectious disease departments, focusing on the challenges faced by social workers in this specialized field.

The Study Recommendations

- Establish a dedicated department or administration for social work services to enable social workers to perform their roles freely. Alternatively, new systems and regulations should be developed to organize and regulate social work services in the medical field, ensuring that social workers have the opportunity to collaborate with the medical and administrative teams when making decisions related to patients.
- The Ministry of Health should intensify efforts in the field of health awareness to raise public knowledge about the role of social workers in healthcare institutions. This should include organizing workshops, seminars, and programs that highlight the social worker's role in hospitals, in collaboration with the medical and administrative teams.
- Hospital management should monitor the performance of social workers and identify any obstacles they may face in carrying out their duties. There should be regular follow-up on their adherence to the guidelines and regulations related to their practice, including the Patient Rights Charter.
- Develop the skills of social workers by implementing training programs specifically tailored to the medical field.
- Patient rights should be prominently displayed in clear locations within the hospital to raise awareness and ensure patients are informed.
- Conduct follow-up studies to gather patient feedback on the healthcare services provided to them in the hospital, with the aim of improving service delivery.
- Undertake additional research and comprehensive studies regarding the role of social workers and the challenges they face in fulfilling their duties in healthcare institutions.

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