



Palliative and Geriatric care and spirituality in medical social work

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Abstract

Palliative Care is a multidiscipline approach to specialized medical and nursing care for people with life threatening illnesses, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment, with treatment of pain and other physical, psychosocial and spiritual problems of a terminal diagnosis to improve quality of life for both the patient and their family and caregivers while Geriatric Medicine is a multi-disciplinary field comprising of medical and other health related disciplines, medical social work inclusive. It is that branch of general medicine concerned with the clinical, preventative, remedial and social aspect of illness in the elderly. It provides Health Promotion, Protection and Prevention (PPP) of disease in the old. On the other hand, in many ways, spiritual issues are becoming a key talking point in the social work profession, as ignoring spirituality is neglecting a major component of many people's lives. However, many social workers don't feel prepared to initiate or participate in these conversations. In some cases, it may be because of lack of formal training on the topic. For that reason, courses on spirituality and social work can be instrumental in providing care and furthering the profession. The paper explains the role and importance of palliative care, geriatric care and spirituality in medical social work.

Keywords: Palliative care, geriatric care, spirituality, medical social worker

Introduction

Palliative Care

Palliative Care is indispensable and social workers with the required training are at the services of patients and relatives/caregivers to render counselling services. Patients seen in the palliative care unit may be given appointment for follow-up of management or referred to other specialist clinic for co-management. Referrals from the palliative care unit is a two-way referral, which means that after treatment in the clinic in which the patient is referred, the patients should come back to the palliative care unit for further follow-up care.

Palliative Support Group

This provides opportunity for patients, doctors, social workers and other specialist to come together and discuss, share personal experiences and interact. The purpose is also for sharing of coping strategies about their illnesses in order to encourage, empower and uplift the patient.

Home Based Care/Home Visit for Palliative Care Patients

This is a key role a medical social worker plays in palliative care and it requires counselling services. The palliative care unit provides medical and supportive care for the patient and family at home. This is especially for the terminally ill patient that prefer to die at home, need hospice care or cannot afford hospital admission.

Family Conference in Palliative Care

The medical social worker alongside other members of the palliative care team, the patient and family relatives/care givers, come together to discuss about the illness, goals of care and plan care strategies to enhance the quality of care provided to patient and the family/carer

Bereavement Services in Palliative Care

This is done by offering counselling, and psychosocial support to the family of a deceased patient on how to bury

their relation and life after the burial. The palliative care team also helps the relation through the grieving period and participants during the burial when it is possible.

Follow-Up Services in Palliative Care

The medical social worker and other members of the palliative care team do routine check-up on the well-being of the patient and their relatives/carer through the following means:

- Telephone (phone calls, conference calls, video calls etc.)
- Home visit
- Emails
- Social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Video and Audio calls etc.)
- Letters
(Servicom, 2019)^[45]

Geriatric Care

The ageing population is rapidly increasing worldwide, in Nigeria with the population of over 200 million, the 60 years and above who are addressed as "The Elderly", "Aged", "Older persons", "Senior Citizens", has risen from about 4.8% (12million) people in 2005 to about 8% (14.72million) in 2018 and about 8.8% (14.82million) in 2022. This trend continuous as it is projected that by 2030, the 60 years and above will be about 16million (UN, 2023) The geriatrician or physician with special training in Old Age Medicine is a post-graduate medical doctor who has completed a post-graduate professional training in general internal medicine and the sub-specialty of geriatric medicine. His/her training enables him/her acquire the skills and competence essential for the practice of managing diseases and ill-health in the aged. The geriatrician or physician in geriatric medicine is therefore a specialist in medicine who provides a complex care whose primary objectives is to meet and overcome breakdown in independent living among old people.

Counselling and Other Roles of a Medical Social Worker in Geriatric Care

1. A medical social worker acts as a comforter, counsellor and mobilizer in care and treatment of the elderly.
2. Relatives and carers should always seek the assistance of a medical social worker for counselling if their aged ones are not taking their prescribed drugs and diets or not adhering to instructions from their doctors or other health service providers.
3. A medical social worker is a broker between the individuals, families and society through counselling, advocacy and various psychosocial support.
4. Assists patients that have forgetfulness or dementia, poor mobility and inability to care for themselves due to old age.
5. A medical social worker is a problem solver for clients who are confused, troubled, depressed and handicapped through counselling.
6. He or she is a coordinator, facilitator, manager, catalyst, provider and resource manager for individuals, groups and families with social problems.
7. He or she acts as an advocate to help vulnerable and oppressed patients.
8. Liaises and networks with other supporting agencies in the care of elderly patients.
(Bell-gam, 2019) ^[5]

Spirituality in Medical Social Work Counselling

The social work profession is predominantly focused on promoting social justice for individuals and communities. This takes many forms, ranging from advocacy to counselling, but all efforts point to a common theme of helping people live healthy, socially adjusted lifestyles. This often means engaging every facet of a person's identity, including spirituality. Spirituality involves the recognition of a feeling or sense or belief that there is something greater than oneself, something more to being human than sensory experience, and that the greater whole of which we are part is cosmic or divine in nature.

Spirituality in social work is important both for social workers themselves and for the clients. In a 2020 study, the Fetzer Institute found that, at least to some extent, 86% of the respondents identified as spiritual. As a factor in so many lives, spirituality is something that social workers need to acknowledge when they're working with their clients, and when rendering counselling services. Knowing how spirituality and social work intersect is important for anyone pursuing a career in social work and who wants to provide services to clients in the most effective manner.

The Role of Spirituality in Social Work

It's important to understand that conversations around spirituality in social work practice aren't about a specific religion. Instead, incorporating spirituality into social work practice is about helping clients to explore the spiritual aspect of their person and help them along a journey of personal discovery that can promote healing and healthy living. Doing this is increasingly recognized as a critical element of social work.

Why Spirituality Matters in Social Work

As a 2019 article in the Journal of Sociology and Social Work notes, the social work profession has increasingly recognized spirituality as an important element in

developing an understanding of the whole person. Gaining knowledge about client's spirituality can enhance a social worker's understanding of clients' potential for development. Conversely, not incorporating spirituality into social work can limit how social workers view their clients' strength.

In weaving spirituality into practice, social workers are better equipped to implement a holistic approach that can empower their clients and open up new possibilities for clients to grow and succeed.

Two ways to Apply Spirituality into Social Work

1. Social Workers can work to apply spirituality in their practice both by strengthening their personal approaches to spirituality
2. And by working to incorporate spirituality into the ways in which they assess and work with their clients.

Social Workers can choose to strengthen their own spirituality. The 2019 Journal of Sociology and Social Work suggested that social workers can elect to strengthen their personal spirituality through approaches such as:

1. Meditating
2. Practicing forgiveness
3. Praying
4. Reading religious books
5. Reflective journaling
6. Practicing yoga

A 2019 article in The New Social Worker noted that social workers who build a strong personal foundation in areas such as self-care and spiritual practices can serve as models for their clients.

Social Workers Can Assess Clients' Spirituality and Incorporate the Results into Treatment Objectives

Research publisher EBSCO notes that social workers can conduct biopsychosocial-spiritual assessments of their clients to gain an understanding of how clients' spirituality affects their well-being. These types of assessments can include activities such as:

1. Interviewing clients to obtain information regarding their personal sense of spirituality.
2. Using screening tools such as the World Health Organization's Quality of Life scale, which can help highlight clients' spiritual beliefs and practices.
3. Reviewing client case records to identify past treatment efforts and their success.
4. Performing direct observation of clients to better understand how clients interact with others.

After a social worker gathers information about a client's spirituality, the social worker can use that information when identifying the best treatment objectives for the client.

Benefits of Spirituality in Social Work

The benefits of incorporating spirituality into social work can be significant. As EBSCO notes:

1. Having knowledge of how clients' spirituality affects their sense of well-being is critical in improving social workers' ability to design services and treatment that have the highest potential for helping clients.

2. When social workers take the time to learn about their clients' spirituality, clients feel better understood and are more inclined to consistently participate in their service and treatment plans.
3. Incorporating spirituality into social work can build trust between social workers and their clients and, therefore, strengthen their therapeutic relationship.

Faith Based Denominational Counselling

Faith Based Denominational Counselling can be provided through a religious group such a Church or Mosque. It can include Christian Counselling, Muslim Counselling, and Buddhist Counselling for example. It can centre around or support a person's spirituality, faith, belief system and religion. The benefit of using a denominational counsellor and a counsellor of the same cultural background, is that it may help with rapport and a genuine understanding of your spiritual beliefs and your religious practices and principles. If the therapist shares the same faith with you, they may understand how your faith influences your options and decisions for your life. (VCP, 2024)

Conclusion

Courses on spirituality in social work cover topics such as: How to initiate and respond to conversations around spiritual matters in a healthy way. This can be a complicated matter as social workers must develop strategies to listen to and support clients while ensuring that they remain professional and clinical in how their personal beliefs influence these conversations.

How to engage in areas of social work practice that are overtly religious or spiritual in nature, such as in counselling roles that are designed to exist within the parameters of a religious organization.

How spirituality has been explored within the social work sector in the past, how best practices are defined in today's climate, and what thought leaders are introducing as ideas that could influence the near future of the sector.

These are just a few of the major topics that can be covered in a spirituality in social work course, but they represent a big picture look at what you can expect. (Regis College, 2023)

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