SOCIAL WORK IN PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

The primary goal of social work is to assist patients and families in addressing the social, emotional and financial factors that have a significant impact on health care/health status. These factors have been identified by the World Health Organization as the Social Determinants of Health.

Social workers are key members of interprofessional primary health care teams in Family Health Teams, Nurse Practitioner-Led Clinics, Community Health Centres, Health Service Organizations, Academic Family Practice Units, and Shared Care Teams. Interprofessional collaboration models such as these enable the delivery of a broader range of services resulting in more comprehensive, cost-effective, coordinated care.

Social work practice focuses on understanding the person in their environment. In addition to counselling and psychotherapy skills, social workers have unique training to work with vulnerable populations, e.g., children at-risk, victims of intimate partner violence, people living in poverty, the frail elderly and newcomers to Canada. Social workers are educated and trained to be adept at understanding and navigating complex service systems.

What is Social Work?

The goal of social work practice is to restore, maintain and enhance social functioning by mobilizing strengths, supporting coping capacities, enhancing patterns of relating and acting, linking people to necessary resources, alleviating environmental stressors and providing psychosocial education related to wellness and well-being.

In Ontario, social work practice is regulated under the Social Work and Social Service Work Act. Only individuals registered with the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) have the legal right to use the title “social worker.” Registration is indicated by the designation “RSW” (Registered Social Worker). Practising social workers may hold a “BSW” (Bachelor’s degree in social work), “MSW” (Master’s degree in social work), or “PhD/DSW” (Doctorate in social work). The complaint and disciplinary process under the statute governing social work practice essentially mirrors those under the Regulated Health Professions Act (RHPA). RSWs adhere to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice established by OCSWSSW.

What are Core Social Work Skills?

Core social work services are listed below and involve the assessment of biopsychosocial and ethnocultural needs of the patient and support system:

- Assess community and other large system factors impacting on patient health and treatment.
- Provided psychosocial interventions that facilitate patient and family adaptation and well-being.
- Facilitate patient and team communication.
- Advocate for required services and navigate complex social systems.
- Provide crisis intervention and mediate conflict.
- Educate and support patients on effective ways to mobilize existing resources.
- Develop and implement appropriate treatment plan based on patients’ complex needs.
What Services Do Social Workers Provide?

To benefit from an interprofessional/collaborative approach, social workers ensure that the patient is a participant in their health care plan. Patients are more apt to follow through with their treatment plan when they feel part of the team and are engaged in this process. This can improve patient outcomes and reduce follow-up visits, non-adherence to treatment plans and subsequent hospital admission.

Social work services can include some, or all of the following:

- **Psychosocial Assessment**: screening for risk; determining need/eligibility for services; identifying strengths/coping capacities; assessing informal network of support.
- **Counselling/Psychotherapy**: assessing the impact of social/cultural factors on health status and supporting appropriate interventions; enhancing coping capacities through early assessment and addressing mental health concerns such as stress, anxiety, depression.
- **Patient/Family Education**: educating patients and families to facilitate understanding of health care status; supporting patient self-management skills.
- **Resource Counselling/Community Supports**: identifying and addressing barriers caused by social/economic factors; identifying options and supports; facilitating referrals and applications to government/community agencies; advocating for access to resources; coordinating referrals.

What Services Do Social Workers Provide to a Primary Health Care Team?

Social workers have training in human behaviour, group process, teamwork, communication, negotiation and research. These skills can help further the broader goals of primary care teams through participation in:

- **Risk Management**: providing psychosocial assessment and follow-up to improve patient adherence/self-management, and to reduce potential for conflicts, complaints and/or litigation.
- **Program Development**: providing leadership and participation in program planning, development and evaluation to ensure patient-centred goals are met.
- **Community Linkages**: offering expert knowledge and liaison with community and government resources; often participating on community committees and boards.
- **Research**: generating discipline-specific or interdisciplinary psychosocial research initiatives addressing psychosocial dimensions of illness and outcomes of interventions.
- **Teaching/Education**: initiating and participating in teaching with the interdisciplinary team — often including medical residents and students. Presenting expertise at workshops and in services, to ensure full scope of practice is understood and utilized.

When to Refer to or Consult with a Social Worker?

Refer when concern exists that the patient and/or family is experiencing the following:

- Difficulties coping with personal, family and/or work life.
- Highly conflictual and/or safety issues are evident in the home.
- Difficulties adapting to medical and chronic health problems, including end-of-life care.
- Inadequate resources, knowledge of formal supports or ability to negotiate service systems.
- Lacks the capacity to manage their care, such as having difficulties goal-setting, problem-solving, negotiating support and future care planning.

Social work expertise can also be utilized to ensure that a patient-centred approach is considered in any population based treatment plan, e.g., diabetes care, chronic pain management.