ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

RE-ALIGNING HEALTH CARE RESOURCES:
RE-AFFIRMING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN HOSPITALS

CONTEXT AND ASSUMPTIONS

- Fiscal constraints are driving a review of the roles of all health care professions as hospitals re-align health care resources
- Many regulated health professions are increasingly aware of the need for greater delineation of their unique contributions to health outcomes.
- Social Work values and expertise are a strong fit with patient-centered care that is at the heart of contemporary health care. However, the full scope of social work practice is often underutilized in health care settings.
- Reducing hospital based social work services and reallocating this to the community, without adequate consideration of vital role hospital-based social workers play, will have a negative impact on long-term patient outcomes.
- The complexity of psychosocial issues emerging in health care demands the level of expertise found in university level qualifications.

CORE SOCIAL WORK EXPERTISE IN HEALTH CARE

Social Work role is distinguished by the ability:

- To address the social determinants of health and well being such as the negative influence of inadequate housing, unemployment, social exclusion and lack of social supports on timely discharge[1] and quality of life, by incorporating an empowerment-based, biopsychosocial approach to assessment and intervention.
- To improve health care outcomes for high-risk clients by identifying and addressing psychosocial issues that affect safety and adaptation to changing health status.
- To address psychosocial needs through psychotherapeutic and social interventions, including counselling related to death, dying and grief.
- To identify patients at risk of prolonged hospital stays or readmission by addressing psychosocial factors that impact on timely and safe discharge utilizing previous relationship to lend support during discharge process.
- To enhance participation in treatment by addressing psychosocial factors that limit or interfere with treatment adherence.
- To enhance effective utilization of health care resources and improve quality of life by addressing salient psychosocial factors critical to the management of chronic and mental illness.
- To exercise, in consultation with the interprofessional team, independent judgment in the provision of psychosocial interventions with complex care patients (key to the Program Management model).
- To diffuse potential conflicts and misunderstandings affecting the health care team and the patient/family through problem solving, effective communication and mediation.

CONTRIBUTION TO MISSION AND GOALS OF HOSPITALS

Social Work positions contribute to the overall goals of hospitals by:

Reducing or Preventing Unnecessary Hospital Admissions
- Generating appropriate interventions and supports for patients who do not require admission for medical reasons and whose care needs can be adequately met in the community: ER visits and "social admissions" are more likely to be reduced. [2][3][4]
- Making linkages with the best available community supports, especially for patients living with chronic illness thus preventing or reducing crisis and unnecessary readmissions.[5][6]

Reducing Length of Hospital Stay
- Screening and intervening early when patients present with risk factors related to safety, emotional adaptation or inadequate resources.
- Formulating care plans within the context of a professional relationship that can pinpoint the psychosocial factors impeding participation in treatment, overall adaptation to a changed health status and discharge from hospital.[7]

Enhancing Efficiency within Hospital and Health Care System
- Freeing up the time of physicians and other health care professionals by addressing psychosocial factors impeding health outcomes.
- Providing detailed analyses and forecasts as well as centralizing information with respect to the management of patients designated as "Alternative Level of Care" (ALC).
- Diffusing and addressing conflicts/complaints thus reducing the risk of lawsuits through effective problem solving, communication and mediation.
- Enhancing service co-ordination and reducing duplication of services through expert knowledge of community resources.

Increased Patient Satisfaction, Health and Well-Being
- Providing "one stop shopping" access to psycho-education, emotional support, interventions that enhance psychosocial adaptation, and linkage to practical supports.

- Identifying and addressing psychosocial issues that lead to patient dissatisfaction and that otherwise have contributed to low scores for emotional support on Patient Satisfaction Surveys.[8]

Competitive Salaries
- Competitive salaries when compared to other disciplines with similar education and scopes of practice.

[1] Keefler, J., Duder, S., Lechman,C. "Predicting Length of Stay in an Acute Care Hospital: The Role of Psychosocial Problems", Social Work in Health Care 10/31/01, Vol. 33, #2 pp 1-16

[2] Keehn, D., Roglitz, C. & Bowden, M. The Impact of Social Work on Recidivism and Non-Medical Complaints in the Ed. Social Work in Health, 1994, 20, 94-95

[3] Bourbeau, J. Julien, M. Maltais, et al. Reduction of Hospital Utilization in Patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. Archives of Internal Medicine, 2003, 163, 585-591.

[4] Claiborne, N. and Vandenburgh, H. Social Workers' Role in Disease Management Health and Social Work, 2001, 26 (4) 217-225

[5] Bodenheimer, T., Lorig, K., Holman, H. et al. Patient Self-Management of Chronic Disease in Primary Care. Journal of the American Medical Association, 2002, 228, 2469-2475

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[7] Sobel, David. Rethinking Medicine: Improving Outcomes with Cost-Effective Psychosocial Interventions. Psychosomatic Medicine, 1995, 57: 234-244

[8] Gesell, S.,Wolosin R., Inpatients¹ Ratings of Care in 5 Common Clinical Conditions, Quality Management in Health Care, Volume 13, Issue 4, 2004