

Place, Role and Functions of Clinical Social Work in the Field of Healthcare

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Abstract. *This publication has been developed on the basis of a thorough theoretical overview. It presents in detail the place, role and functions of Social Activities specialists in the field of health care. In the methodology of the study, the researchers rely on the desk research method, through which a detailed secondary analysis of already existing empirical data and analysis of the content of documents is carried out. Going through the individual stages of the study, the place, role and functions of social work specialists in the field of healthcare are presented in detail. These functions include: assessment of the physical and mental needs of the patient, informing patients and their family members, providing support in planning finances and assistance with financial assistance, developing plans for follow-up care, individual and/or group counseling, identifying mental health problems, working with various types of documents, advocating for patients' rights and training interested parties regarding specific aspects of the specific condition. The emphasis in the study is placed on the essence and content of clinical social work, the place and role of clinical social work specialists in the structural units of healthcare. The degree of interaction between scientific achievements and practice in the field of clinical social work is presented. The functions of clinical social work specialists in the process of performing professional activities and the skills they need to possess for this are synthesized. A number of facts are identified, confirming the importance of the clinical social worker in multidisciplinary health care teams.*

Keywords: clinical social work, health care.

Introduction

Social work is a unified system of values, theory and practice. In its diverse forms, it addresses the multiple and complex interactions between people and their environments. Its primary goal is to enable all people to develop their full potential and to enrich their lives, by preventing dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on identifying, solving problems and achieving change. It addresses barriers, inequalities and injustices that exist in society and responds to both the everyday problems of the individual and society as a whole, and the crises and emergencies that accompany them. In line with its holistic approach to individuals and their environments, social work uses a variety of skills, techniques and activities in clinical practice (Angelova-Barbalova & Krushkova, 2013).

Although EU countries have different social policies, they all agree on the need to provide protection and mediation in finding employment for vulnerable people of working age

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(Kostadinova & Antonova, 2018). Social work practice in the field of medicine is an indispensable part of patient care. Social work in healthcare is a growing field and clinical social workers play a crucial role in addressing the complex social and emotional needs of patients and their families. The proven link between psychosocial conditions and biophysical features promoted in social work stimulates its professionalism and proves that clinical social workers have an undeniable position in the multidisciplinary medical team in healthcare settings (Albrithen, A. & Yalli, N. 2023).

The aim of this paper, based on an in-depth theoretical review, is to examine the place, role and functions of social workers in healthcare. The main hypothesis is that the place of the clinical social worker is important in building multidisciplinary health care teams. In correspondence, two sub-hypotheses are also formulated: (1) the functions performed by social work specialists are crucial for the successful work of multidisciplinary teams in healthcare organizations; (2) the effectiveness of the process of performing the professional activities of the clinical social worker in the health sector improves the work of multidisciplinary health care teams.

Literature review

Essence and content of clinical social work

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defines social work as a practice-based profession and academic discipline that strives for social justice in accordance with human rights.

Social work is based on a broad theoretical foundation. According to the global definition of social work, its studies and theories are applied in practice (IFSW, 2022). Clinical social work is defined as a specialized area of social work practice. In the scientific literature, the terms “clinical” and “medical” social work are used interchangeably.

Medical social work began at Massachusetts General Hospital in 1905, and Ida Cannon is considered its founder. For the first time in 1930, she described the role of medical social workers in medical institutions, emphasizing the fact that the medical social services movement recognized the need for specialists in the hospital to represent the patient's point of view, to work together with doctors and to assist in the process of adaptation during medical treatment, as the focus of interventions should be directed to the patient's social condition. Prof. Georgi Hadzhiyski points out that the clinical process is essentially a complex system of activities, including diagnostics, therapy and prognosis, with a view to restoring the maximum possible intrapersonal balance of the individual with the environment. The researcher examines its direct intersections with two scientific disciplines (medicine and clinical psychology) and concludes that if it is assumed that medicine is primarily focused on the physiological aspects of the impact of the disease, and clinical psychology - on the impact of the disease on the intellectual-volitional sphere, clinical social work is determined to provide an assessment and adequate responses to some of the challenges that the disease poses in relation to the new place of the person living with it in the relevant society (Hadzhiyski, G., 2011).

Place and role of clinical social workers in healthcare settings

In medical practice, doctors and healthcare professionals, whose work is crucial to maintaining the physical condition of patients, are undoubtedly at the forefront. In the medical facility, the clinical social worker remains "behind the scenes", but his task is extremely important - to support patients and their families, to ensure that they have the resources to successfully go through the therapeutic process and cope with their emotional and psychosocial imbalances.

The object of intervention of clinical social work is focused on the prevention, assessment, diagnosis and treatment of specific, severe and long-term conditions, the course of which is always

accompanied by large financial costs for the health and social system, on the one hand, and adverse consequences in the psycho-emotional state of the person affected by the disease and his relatives, on the other. These are most often mental illnesses, emotional and behavioral disorders, oncological diseases, physical and mental disabilities in children and adults, maternal and child health care, conditions accompanying the aging process and many others. Interventions are carried out by clinical social workers, whose powers are regulated through the legislative and regulatory process of each country. Most often, clinical social workers provide services in medical institutions of various types, specialized in the treatment of various types of diseases, primary medical and emergency care, agencies for the provision of social services in the post-hospital treatment stage, as well as an individual or group private practice, having received the appropriate licensing for the country. The most commonly used methods of intervention in practice are individual, group and family work/therapy. Among the daily work activities of the clinical social worker are counseling, collaboration with other professionals within the health care system and coordination of services in the community.

The goal of interventions is to improve and maintain psychosocial functioning. Clinical social workers help clients make psychological and interpersonal changes, increase their access to social and material resources, and maintain their level of abilities and strengths achieved. Interventions in clinical social work may include therapeutic, supportive, educational, and advocacy activities. Clinical social work includes interventions that focus on interpersonal interactions and intrapsychic processes, and support for independent living. The goal of all interventions in clinical social work is to maintain and strengthen the health of clients by addressing their social problems and, in particular, by improving the relationship and adjustment between the individual and the environment (the so-called "Person-in-Environment" focus). This serves, not least, to expand the possibilities for full functioning of clients. An integral element of clinical social work is the active approach, which supports the process of using appropriate tools for establishing medical history and diagnosis and for building an assessment and planning of interventions. Clinical social work helps by: changing the client - it develops coping skills in him, increases or supports his potential for adaptation and for leading an independent life; improves the quality of biopsychosocial functioning; stabilizes the experiences and behavior of the person; balances and improves the quality of connections and relationships in the client's social environment; transforms the immediate social environment of the individual client in terms of its attitude and sensitivity to his individual characteristics and capabilities (Savova, 2021).

Medical social work plays a key role in ensuring comprehensive and quality healthcare delivery, especially in hospital settings. The effectiveness of the work of clinical social workers in various healthcare settings has been described in scientific publications by a number of international researchers. In their publication from April 2024, a team of Indian researchers outlines the multifaceted responsibilities that medical social workers assume in their work, including ethical behavior, transparency in hospital management, and advocacy for the well-being of vulnerable patients. The publication highlights the undeniable impact of the work of social workers in healthcare and highlights the critical need for medical social workers in both rural and urban healthcare settings in India. The article emphasizes the need to recognize and strengthen the role of medical social workers in healthcare delivery systems (Kori et al., 2024).

American researchers Courtney Blanford and Tawandra Rowell-Consolo, in their August 2024 article, argue that social workers are well-equipped to play a critical role in the treatment of opioid use, as they are trained in the skills and values needed to facilitate access to harm reduction programs, promote engagement in substance abuse treatment, and create and advocate for

interventions to address problematic substance abuse, especially in badly affected communities (Bharadwaj et al., 2024). Hence, it can be concluded that social work plays an important role in the prevention and support of individuals affected by addictive behavior or co-dependency (Venelinova & Bratoeva, 2023).

In their August 2024 publication, Bharadwaj and co-authors describe the specifics of clinical social work with homeless individuals with chronic mental illnesses, aimed at their reintegration into society and the complex challenges faced by social workers (Bharadwaj et al., 2024a). In another recent publication (August 2024), an Indian scientific team, again under the leadership of Bharadwaj, summarizes the important role of professional social workers in promoting comprehensive care for patients, promoting collaboration between different institutions, supporting disadvantaged communities, and promoting systematic improvements in health systems. The authors conclude that the contribution of clinical social work to the field of health care has become increasingly significant in recent years. They demonstrate this with examples from a neurology department, where social workers are integral members of the team and implement a range of interventions in their work to support patients and their families. Similarly, the researchers confirm the role of social workers in different sectors of health care and the profiling of each of them as ENT social worker, orthopedic social worker, obstetrics and gynecology social worker, hematology social worker, pulmonary social worker, gastrointestinal social worker, urology social worker, oncology social worker, psychiatric social worker, geriatric social worker, emergency social worker, dermatology social worker, social workers in community medicine and rehabilitation. The paper highlights the growing recognition of the integration of professional social work into modern health systems to address the complex psychosocial needs of patients/clients and improve health outcomes (Bharadwaj et al., 2024). Cleak (Cleak, 1988) and Riebel (Riebel, 2009) have documented and demonstrated the undeniable benefits of clinical social workers in emergency settings, and the effects of their skills in providing immediate intervention, realistic problem assessment, and timely crisis intervention. The situations described by the researchers demonstrate that this leads to early detection and treatment of non-medical aspects of the patient's problem and appropriate referral to other agencies for longer-term follow-up. The role of the clinical social worker in child health care in improving access to health information provided to parents upon discharge from hospital is the subject of a paper by Eliza King Lassman, Olivia Pestrin, Hussein Tasnim, and Sigdel Durga, presented at a conference organized by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and held in Birmingham in March 2024 (Lassman et al., 2024).

Degree of interaction between scientific achievement and practice in clinical social work

Social work and, in particular, clinical social work, is based on research, but despite this statement (IFSW, 2022) there is a gap between scientific knowledge and practice relating to clinical social work. Cabassa points out that leading social work researchers, experts from the Institute of Medicine and the US Department of Health and Human Services and the country's National Institute of Mental Health note a growing gap between the knowledge generated by the best clinical research in social work and the integration of this evidence into routine practices (Cabassa, 2016).

A research team led by Milena Heinsch has argued that despite the recent move towards greater use of research in many areas of social work, there is ongoing criticism that decision-making in practice is rarely based on sound scientific evidence (Heinsch et al., 2016). A UK research team led by Jodie Wakefield has argued that evidence-based practice is being promoted within social work/social care, with emerging evidence of benefits for practitioners and service users (Wakefield et al., 2021).

Other studies of different national contexts and social work practices have shown that research is unfortunately an underused source of knowledge for social workers. A Norwegian study among social workers in child protection services has found that not theory, but information about specific cases, the personal experiences of social workers and colleagues are the most important sources of knowledge (Iversen & Heggen, 2016). A Romanian study has found that access to scientific databases is poor and social workers rarely use scientific research in decision-making in their practice (Iovu et al., 2015). A German study among social workers has also found that when making decisions in their daily work, respondents indicated that they were guided mainly by discussions with colleagues, professional and life experience, and expert opinion (James et al., 2019).

Methodology

For the purposes of this study the desk research method is selected and applied. This approach is based on collecting and processing information from various sources in order to analyze a specific problem or area. For the purposes of this study, desk research method is particularly useful, as it is based on a detailed study of the available information, and does not require a direct connection with the objects of the study.

The desk research method was chosen because it is not limited by predefined methods or research frameworks. It uses methods of secondary analysis of already existing empirical data and analysis of the content of documents. In performing the study, presented in this paper, a review of national statistics, scientific studies, publications in the media and other sources is included. Thanks to the chosen research method, the possibility of preliminary acquaintance and entry into the research area is relied on, with the aim of extracting useful information from various sources. The results of the desk research conducted in this way are presented in the form of a review report, which contains an analysis of the collected information and conclusions from it.

In this study, for the desk research, the time period of publishing is set as a prerequisite for the selection of literature sources. The author's team focused primarily on works from the last five years (after year 2000). The reason was to identify and analyze current trends regarding the specifics of clinical social work and its role in healthcare organizations. No specific statistical methods are used in the selection of specialized literature, but the following limiting conditions are taken into account, which provide a clear direction for the secondary analysis of the existing data: (1) literature sources presenting results of research in a real environment are selected as a priority, since evidence-based practice is encouraged within social work; (2) in order to overcome the stigma that scientific research is a rarely used source of knowledge for social workers, works by established scientific specialists in the field under study are selected; (3) research work and results by leading international experts are predominantly used, conducting their research with an emphasis on the key role of the clinical social worker in improving the quality of healthcare provided in hospital settings, since in Bulgaria this topic has not yet been studied in detail by the scientific community.

Results and discussions

Functions of Clinical Social Work Specialists

Healthcare social workers are defined differently in the scientific literature, for example: medical social worker (Heiwe et al., 2013), hospital social worker (Sjöström, 2013), and health social worker (Sernbo, 2019).

In Bulgaria, the terms *clinical social work*, and for the specialists practicing it - *clinical social workers*, have been adopted.

An important point that should not be overlooked is that in recent decades, clinical social work has consolidated its place among the so-called “helping professions” worldwide, and health and medical social workers benefit from a positive career outlook. The need for clinical social work specialists is constantly growing. For example, in the United States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a 7% growth in health care social workers by 2032.

The professional activities of a clinical social worker vary depending on the specifics of the field of clinical employment and the individual needs of each patient/client. Since each case is unique, health care social workers need to be able to adapt to working with users with different identified needs. It is very difficult to single out all the activities that a clinical social worker performs in his/her professional work.

1. Assessment of the patient's physical and mental needs. Assessing the patient's needs is one of the first duties of the clinical social worker. An influential factor in achieving good results in satisfying these needs is the emotional and social intelligence (Kostadinova, 2019). A correct assessment is a prerequisite for well-implemented therapeutic work at the next stage. The assessment is usually carried out by reviewing medical records, interviewing the patient, his relatives and the medical staff. Its purpose is to obtain detailed information about the social history of the case and the prerequisites for the emergence of the specific situation. Social workers in healthcare discuss physical and mental illnesses and gain an idea of the social, emotional and financial needs of their clients.

Based on the initial case assessment, the clinical social worker develops a personalized plan for working with the specific patient. Most often, the plan includes activities such as supporting communication between the patient and his/her family members, the patient and the medical staff, family members and the medical staff, the patient/his/her family members and other institutions, or assisting in finding long-term support services. In carrying out this activity, the clinical social worker most often has contact with the patient. This gives great importance to the role of the social worker within the interdisciplinary health care team.

2. Informing the patient and his family members. There is convincing evidence in medical practice that good information of patients about their condition, treatment and possible side effects leads to increased trust in the treatment team, creates a sense of comfort in the patient and indirectly obliges him to adhere to the given recommendations. Results of a study published in *Seminars in Oncology Nursing* show that patients with cancer, as a result of working together with a clinical social worker, “benefit from gaining knowledge, improved self-care, reduced anxiety, improved self-image and self-esteem, increased satisfaction with care, improved pain control and reduced disruptions in daily functioning” (Fernsler & Cannon, 1991).

Social workers meet patients at their most vulnerable state and the ability to find answers and allay fears are essential skills for all social workers in all healthcare settings - hospitals, outpatient care facilities, nursing homes, etc. The social worker supports the patient and their family members throughout the healing process, suggests alternative solutions in certain situations, and supports and guides them in making decisions. Practice shows that competent, adequately and timely informed patients are better able to manage their pain and have higher self-esteem.

3. Providing financial planning support and assistance with financial assistance. It is not uncommon for medical procedures, supplies, and the treatment itself not to be fully covered by the patient's health insurance. In such cases, along with other health concerns, they also experience financial difficulties that can complicate their condition or prompt them to refuse a proposed

medical procedure. In these cases, clinical social workers are again closest to the patient and are the first to identify this stress, help them cope with it, and refer patients to community resources, financial and legal assistance plans, according to their needs. Social workers advise and refer patients to associations that cover insurance risks that arise from the health condition (Abanozova, & Pavlov, 2022). After treatment is completed, many social workers help patients find a job or direct them to acquire appropriate education for the purpose of financial independence.

4. *Developing aftercare plans.* Clinical social workers help patients and their families find the resources they need to cope after leaving the hospital. Activities in this area most often include searching for optimal options for providing home medical and/or rehabilitation care and coordinating their provision. A primary focus of social workers' activities is preparing the patient for life after the end of hospital treatment, planning for discharge and aftercare.

5. *Counseling patients/clients – individually and/or in groups.* Patients and their families often need basic or additional information about the disease, the therapeutic process, possible side effects of therapy, etc. The clinical social worker is the specialist who consults them and facilitates their passage through all stages of this process. In the form of individual consultations, for example, he helps oncological patients cope with pain, and by organizing and leading a group of patients undergoing chemotherapy, he provides them with a way to share experiences of coping with pain and receive the emotional support they need at that moment.

6. *Identifying mental health problems.* Going through treatment, especially for severe life-threatening conditions, is a serious test for the psycho-emotional state of patients and their families. Stress is a natural human condition, producing a reaction that prompts individuals to cope with the challenges and threats in their lives. The degree to which they experience stress varies and is a projection of multifactorial relationships between personality characteristics, the type and complexity of the stressor, and specific dimensions of the environment (Beloeva & Antonova, 2023). The clinical social worker has the skills to identify manifestations of psycho-emotional stress in patients and to make appropriate recommendations.

7. *Working with different types of documents.* Clinical social work is also related to keeping and processing different types of documentation, for which the social worker must have the relevant skills. The documents can be of different types and nature of application - rating scales, work plans and implementation schedules, reports and information for different types of institutions, insurance documents and many others.

8. *Patient Advocates.* One of the primary functions of a clinical social worker, regardless of their role, is to advocate for the rights of patients. They work with medical staff to ensure that patients are treated with respect and receive appropriate care at every stage of their recovery. This may include informing medical professionals of any barriers a patient may have in following medical recommendations.

9. *Education.* Social workers educate their patients and their healthcare colleagues by applying an understanding of patients' needs and their knowledge to address the complexities of the healthcare system. This is particularly important in relation to understanding the social determinants of access to services offered by healthcare organisations, which requires social responsibility, empathic understanding and clear communication to ensure the highest quality of patient care (Kostadinova et al., 2019).

Skills of Clinical Social Workers

In order to perform the above activities qualitatively, clinical social workers need to possess various work skills. These skills are acquired through training and practical experience.

In general, the skills necessary for the implementation of quality clinical work in a social worker can be divided into two types - practical and interpersonal. The group of basic practical skills can include case management, crisis intervention, planning and discharge of responsibility and treatment planning. Interpersonal skills focus on active listening, advocacy, collaboration, showing empathy, interpersonal intelligence, problem solving, decision-making, verbal and non-verbal communication, cultural sensitivity and excellent time management.

Clinical social workers in some countries, e.g. in the USA, are entitled to practise as such after fulfilling certain conditions (educational degree, professional experience, work under supervision and successfully passing an exam) and receiving a license.

The Place of Clinical Social Work in Bulgaria

The theory and practice of clinical social work in Bulgaria have an almost century-old history. As a separate, independent work activity carried out by qualified specialists and aimed at satisfying specific psychosocial needs of certain categories of Bulgarian children and individuals, clinical social work in our country dates back to the 1960s. Since then, in a number of our medical and social institutions, located in the structure of the then Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare, social workers have also participated in the teams of highly qualified specialists of doctors, nurses and rehabilitators, offering therapeutic services to their clients - elderly people, individuals and children with physical and mental illnesses. However, at present the profession is still not clearly recognizable among society and somewhat unattractive among young people. The main reasons include: (1) frequent social cataclysms; (2) permanent institutional reforms in the country; (3) lack of its own school, which would synthesize positive experience and traditions; (4) negative trend of growth of psycho-social phenomena such as: over-hospitalization, drastically increasing number of persons with disabilities, widespread dissatisfaction of citizens with the health and social services offered.

Currently, highly qualified social workers with bachelor's and master's degrees are being trained in a number of Bulgarian higher educational institutions in academic degree programmes "Social Activities" and "Clinical Social Work" (Hadzhiyski, 2011). They find professional realization mainly in the structure of the system for providing social services with a clinical component. At this stage in our country, only a few medical institutions have a clinical social worker among the team of specialists. The quality of the medical care provided would undoubtedly increase if a clinical social worker/s also functioned in the multidisciplinary team of each medical institution. Their skills and competencies have proven their effectiveness in working with individuals with various chronic somatic diseases, acute conditions, oncological diseases, etc. Global experience also shows profiling of clinical social workers depending on their field of professional realization, e.g. oncohematological social workers. In this way, these specialists are profiled in a certain field and increase their competencies for working in it.

Conclusion

The here presented scientific material's main purpose is the theoretical review and definition of new applications of social workers in healthcare. The study in it is based on the desk research method, which relies on methods of secondary analysis of already existing empirical data and analysis of the content of documents. The limitations that the authors set themselves in order to guarantee a higher level of objectivity when testing the formulated hypothesis are: (1) selection of literature sources, preferably published in the last five years, that present results from research in a real environment, as evidence-based practice is promoted within social work; (2) in order to

overcome the stigma that scientific research is rarely used as a source of knowledge for social workers, works by established scientific specialists in the researched field have been selected; (3) preferential reference to developments by leading international experts conducting their research with an emphasis on the key role of the clinical social worker in improving the quality of healthcare provided in hospital settings.

Stemming from the in-depth overview analysis, the following generalizations can be conceptualised:

Clinical social work is a scientific, research and practical discipline of social work, whose focus is mainly on psychosocial disorders, social aspects, somatic diseases and disabilities, both in children and adults. Clinical social work interventions aim at prevention, support of the therapeutic process, rehabilitation of chronic conditions in order to restore social functioning and quality of life. Interventions in clinical social work are aimed at individuals with diseases/disabilities, families of individuals with diseases/disabilities and the medical team working directly with individuals with diseases/disabilities.

Clinical social workers have the skills to conduct interventions with the aforementioned individuals, which aim to change behavior, learn from experience, work with experiences, model the attitudes and the approach of the individual to his problem. Within the framework of their professional activity, social workers in the field of healthcare perform a wide range of functions, including: assessing the physical and mental needs of the patient, informing patients and their family members, providing support in financial planning and help with financial assistance, developing aftercare plans, individual and/or group counseling, identifying mental health problems, working with various types of documents, advocating for patients' rights and educating interested parties on particular aspects of the specific condition. In Bulgaria, the importance of including clinical social workers in various healthcare organizations is constantly growing. This fact is determined by negative trends such as: increasing overall morbidity, increasing the proportion of persons with permanent disabilities and aging of the population.

Based on the key results of this scientific work thus defined, the following recommendations can be made for their future application: (1) affirming the place and function of clinical social work in Bulgarian organizations in the field of healthcare and social activities in order to improve the quality of life of patients/clients and increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the work of multidisciplinary teams; (2) changing the attitudes of the management bodies of Bulgarian organizations in the field of healthcare and social activities towards increasing the share of clinical social work specialists in them; (3) profiling of clinical social workers in Bulgaria in accordance with individual specialties in the field of healthcare following the example of leading countries in social work; (4) taking actions aimed at legislative regulation of the licensing of the activities of clinical social workers in Bulgaria, which would be linked to the obligation to undergo advanced training in order to improve the quality of the services offered.

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