



UNSUNG HEROES

SOCIAL WORKERS CARRY OUT HOSPITAL'S MISSION TO PROVIDE PATIENT-CENTERED CARE

You come to a hospital expecting care for your heart, lungs, spine or other parts of the body. But getting well and staying well may take more than surgery and stitches or prescriptions and procedures. After all, much of the healing you'll do takes place after you leave the hospital. That's where social workers come in.

"There is a huge team of people focused on patients' medical issues, but as social workers, we look at patients in a completely different light," says Cindy Frank, a licensed social worker at Medical City Dallas Hospital. "We're looking at what's happening at home, what obstacles they're

facing in being healthy, and how we can help improve their lives when they leave these four walls."

Hospital social workers do a lot of work behind the scenes to arrange ongoing care for patients once they are discharged. When someone lives alone without family caregivers available, a social worker might arrange for that person to recover in a skilled nursing facility for a few weeks. If homelessness or addiction is likely to hinder treatment, a social worker may connect the patient to a nonprofit agency that can provide appropriate resources.

Individuals and families dealing with serious health issues can feel overwhelmed by all the decisions they're

facing, as well as the complexity of the healthcare system. They may be worried that they can't afford treatments or need counseling to come to terms with a frightening diagnosis. Medical social workers can step into any of these situations and provide support and resources.

But that's just a glimpse of the compassion and resourcefulness that social workers bring to the healthcare teams at HCA Healthcare hospitals like yours. In fact, hospital social workers are among many unsung heroes who play a vital role in providing a personalized, healing environment for both patients and their caregivers.

BEYOND MEDICAL TREATMENT

A social worker's job is fast-paced and always changing. "My job is many things, but it's never boring," Frank says.

One moment she's tracking down a space heater for a family in need, the next she's on the phone with an insurance company. Then it's off to Mr. Smith's room for comfort and support, before sitting down to plan the discharge for Mrs. Jones, who will need oxygen and therapy for a few weeks after she gets home.

Hospital social workers also provide a critical link in mental healthcare. When a loved one is diagnosed with a mental illness, it can trigger a lot of emotion in family members, who may feel confused or devastated.

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In many cases, "we serve as the liaison between the doctor and the family," adds Mary Duff, a licensed social worker at Parthenon Pavilion. "We often start working on discharge plans as soon as patients are admitted, not because we're trying to move them out of the hospital but because we're trying to figure out what their plan will be."

Creating a successful discharge plan often depends on social workers being able to connect patients to services in the community. People leaving the hospital after a mental health episode have a range of needs. Some may need a referral to a good support group or outpatient treatment center. Others may need to be admitted into a residential facility that can provide long-term care. Recently, a social worker at Parthenon Pavilion negotiated a patient's admittance to a group home before funding was available, Slifer says.

"Social workers have a wealth of knowledge about resources in the community," says Sheri Harris, director of case management at Memorial Hospital Jacksonville in Jacksonville, Florida. "We can mobilize quickly to get patients the help they need."



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But first, social workers must be able to discern what’s needed by communicating effectively with patients and their caregivers. That’s when social workers’ draw upon their clinical experience in active listening and case management.

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For instance, social workers might provide counseling at the bedside for patients who are transitioning to hospice care. Social workers also serve as advocates for patients who are unable to speak for themselves or lack an understanding of their diagnosis, Duff says. But one of the most underrated, but important, things social workers do is listen.

“It helps patients to know they’re being heard, and they may not have felt like that for a long time—or ever,” Frank says. “Just sitting and listening to them and supporting them can make a huge difference in patients’ lives. By listening, you’re often able to pinpoint a need or an anxiety that you can help them overcome. A social worker can make a difference that patients may not have been expecting when they came to the hospital.”

WORKING WITH HEALTHCARE TEAMS

Just as patients are sometimes surprised by the services provided by hospital social workers, members of the healthcare team are often unaware of what social workers can bring to the table.

“When I first started at Memorial three years ago, the staff at the hospital did not understand the clinical capabilities and the significant interventions utilized by social workers,”

says Memorial Hospital’s Harris. “But social workers have a unique way of blending the medical care team with patients and their families.”

Social workers are adept at facilitating communications in a busy medical environment, Harris says. That’s because social workers are trained to establish a rapport with patients and their caregivers, which can help identify what information or services are needed to ease a person’s mind and body.

For the past three years, Harris says she’s been working to shine a spotlight on how she and her peers can enhance patient care. And those efforts are paying off.

“Nurses and doctors see the successes that our social workers have with patients,” she says. “If clinicians are faced with a challenging situation, they’ll ask to work with a social worker. If a patient’s family member is having a hard time dealing with a diagnosis, a nurse might call and ask one of our social workers to come in. Clinicians throughout the hospital have come to trust our social workers, and they have become valued throughout the facility.”



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For social workers, providing advocacy, communication and compassion at multiple points along the healthcare continuum is all in a day’s work—even if that means staying late or working unusual hours.

“Our social workers frequently go above and beyond the call of duty,” Slifer says. “We have many social workers who will stay late to help their patients. Going above and beyond is just part of the job.” ■