

Social Work in Outpatient Health Settings

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The Need for Social Work in Primary Healthcare Settings

Healthcare practices have rapidly evolved over the past several generations, and researchers continue to investigate ways to improve the practices that are in place. The implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) in 2010 is one structural change that has significantly affected healthcare in the last decade. The changes made in the PPACA have helped enhance healthcare services by outlining different ways to integrate health with a holistic, individualized approach to patient care (Stanhope et al., 2015). Although the PPACA was implemented a decade ago, integrated health is still not fully adopted in healthcare settings, and the traditional model of healthcare continues to be the dominant form of practice in many areas of the United States.

The traditional medical model of healthcare focuses on the treatment of illness rather than the prevention of the illness or overall health of the patient (British Medical Association Board of Science, 2011). There are many needs that have are unmet from this traditional medical model, especially when it comes to mental health and chronic disease. This model of health causes a fragmented healthcare system where patients are expected to have multiple providers in multiple settings and they must pay for their services through multiple systems (Golden, 2011). This fragmented healthcare system causes many patients and their issues to become neglected or overlooked, increases healthcare costs, leads to physician burnout, and causes overall dissatisfaction with the healthcare system.

As different medical settings begin to realize the importance of a holistic approach to patient care and services become more specialized, there has been an increased need for a more integrated approach. Integrated healthcare allows primary care providers and behavioral specialists to collaborate care for patients in order to provide for the overall wellbeing of the

patient in a single visit and location (Lee et al., 2016). Social workers are ideal candidates to assist in the integration of health due to their ability to address all aspects of a patient's life, ability to be flexible and adaptable (Lombardi et al., 2019), expertise in behavioral health and evidence-based treatment, knowledge of resources (de Saxe Zerden et al., 2019), focus on strengths-based and person-in-environment perspectives, experience with vulnerable populations, and ability to advocate and assist in policy change and research (National Association of Social Workers, 2016).

The purpose of this review is to evaluate the problems in traditional healthcare settings and how social workers can utilize different theoretical perspectives and models to help combat those issues in an integrated primary healthcare setting. The issues addressed in this review include patient quality of care, coordination of care, structural healthcare needs and physician satisfaction, and healthcare costs.

Problem Exploration

Patient Quality of Care

A holistic approach to healthcare is important in order to provide the highest quality of care to patients. This approach includes meeting the emotional, mental, social, spiritual, cultural, and environmental needs of each patient as well as his/her physical needs. The psychological and social needs of patients are correlated with physical ailments and treatment adherence but are largely unresolved in primary healthcare. Craig et al. (2016) found that many individuals visit their primary care physician for physical needs yet continue to have anxiety and depression that is untreated. These mental health issues can cause poor self-management which can lead to decreased medication and treatment adherence (Craig et al., 2016).

Healthy lifestyle changes recommended by primary care physicians can be hard for any individual to implement, but Reardon (2010) notes that it is even more challenging for individuals who suffer from mental health issues due to their already decreased daily functioning. Many patients with minor physical health issues related to stress, depression, and anxiety do not seek out mental healthcare due to stigma and issues with accessibility, but continue to visit their primary care physicians who may not be equipped to handle complex behavioral, emotional, and social issues (McGregor et al., 2018).

Healthcare systems and physicians are increasingly rated based on patient satisfaction scores, and these scores can significantly affect funding and patient volume. A patient's satisfaction with a physician and/or healthcare setting is largely based on the quality of care received. In order to provide improved patient quality of care in primary care settings, social workers are equipped with the ability to implement biopsychosocial assessments, individualize treatment, assist patients in developing self-efficacy, provide psychoeducation, and integrate behavioral treatment plans into their healthcare (Craig et al., 2016). They can also evaluate social determinants that are barriers to a patient's ability to implement treatment plans and medical advice given by the patient's primary care physician (British Medical Association Board of Science, 2011). In a systematic review of literature, McGregor et al. (2018), showed that implementing social work models that focused on relationship, self-efficacy, and individualized care into healthcare settings significantly improved the overall wellbeing of patients.

Coordination of Care

Since the traditional medical model creates a fragmented healthcare system, many patients end up neglected and forgotten in the referral process. Mann et al., (2016) reports that this type of healthcare system causes many diagnoses to be untreated and can result in error. The

researchers found that an integrated health system can increase efficiency and time management for providers, increase provider consultations on what strategies to use with patients (Mann et al., 2016). Craig et al. (2016) notes that having an interdisciplinary team of physicians and behavioral health specialists in one location ensures that patients can address all their complex medical issues and decreases the barriers to access of care.

Obtaining health insurance is a complicated process and patients can find it difficult to navigate. Evans et al. (2018) reports that social workers are unique in their ability to comprehend social barriers, flexibility in care, and ability to be a liaison between patients and insurance companies. Social workers are able to educate patients on available insurance and the coverage and cost of different plans, as well as advocate on the patients' behalf to the insurance companies (Evans et. al, 2018).

Physician Satisfaction/Retention and Structural Healthcare Needs

Physician burnout can be a threat to healthcare and patient quality of care. Researchers (Kung et al., 2019) state that physician burnout can cause a disruption in the continuity of care of patients as well as cause increased healthcare expenditures due to turnover. They found that burnout and decreased physician satisfaction occurs when there is a decreased amount of social resources to address patients' needs. Physicians noted they felt ill-equipped and untrained in handling patients' social needs, and therefore had increased stress when patients had decreased treatment adherence due to such needs. The researchers reported that social workers can provide information regarding resources, use research and evidence-based interventions to affect structural changes, and act as liaisons between the physicians, patients, and community (Kung et al., 2019).

Reardon (2010) found that the unmet psychological needs of patients in primary care settings causes patients to visit the emergency department and or primary care physician more often, which can lead to a decreased amount of resources available for other patients. Lee et al. (2016) noted that patients with severe mental health illness were less likely to seek preventative care for their illness and more likely to end up in the emergency department. Stanhope et al. (2015), attributes the issues with quality of care and access to services to the concentration of resources in treating chronic issues rather due to other comorbid factors while following the traditional medical model of care. McFeature and Pierce (2012) showed that implementing behavioral health services into an integrated healthcare program provides improved quality of care and decreased need for as many medical resources.

Healthcare Costs

Lee et al. (2016) found that patients with severe mental illness (SMI) were more likely to have chronic comorbid medical conditions, which caused increased healthcare cost overall. They showed that although individuals with SMI were a low population, they made up a large amount of healthcare expenditures. As a patient's mental illness remains untreated, it worsens and therefore causes increased healthcare costs due to increased service utilization for acute issues. The study found that integrated health provides a cost-effective treatment regimen that decreases long term healthcare costs (Lee et al., 2016). The reduction in medical resources used for behavioral health and comorbid issues also leads to decreased healthcare costs (McFeature & Pierce, 2012).

Theoretical Perspectives

The primary theoretical perspectives that are involved in this topic are integrated health, patient-centered care, and holistic approaches to primary healthcare. These perspectives can be combined into one model of healthcare, the Patient Centered Medical Home (PCMH). Stanhope et al. (2015) describes the PCMH as a medical model that provides services to address a patient's holistic needs while focusing on the relationships between physicians, patients, and behavioral health specialists to allow the patients to focus on preventative measures and self-efficacy.

McFeature and Pierce (2012) emphasize the need for behavioral health specialists to provide brief assessments for patients and to assist patients in addressing lifestyle stressors that may be acting as barriers to their care. They also note the importance of individualized patient care due to different severity, amount of issues, and functionality of patients, and the PCMH focuses on providing flexibility in appointments to implement individualized care (McFeature & Pierce, 2012). Mann et al. (2016) notes the unique ability of social workers to fill the role of behavioral specialists in the PCMH model due to the varied skill set and code of ethics implemented by social workers. They discuss the role of behavioral health specialists in the PCMH model including implementing assessments and treatment modalities, consultations with patients and providers, and addressing barriers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the needs of patients are inadequately addressed in a traditional medical model of healthcare. This model causes patients to have decreased quality of care, decreased coordination of care, increased healthcare needs and physician burnout, and increased overall healthcare costs. Integrated health, specifically the Patient Centered Medical Home (PCMH)

model, is necessary in order to address the demands that are being neglected with the traditional medical model. The National Association of Social Workers (2016) outlines the need for social workers to provide benchmarks for quality social work practice in healthcare settings and educate policymakers and other healthcare professionals on the role of social workers in healthcare settings. Stanhope et al. (2015) notes that social workers are in an excellent position at this time to assist in designing and delivering PCMH into healthcare systems due to the need for integrated healthcare and the social worker's unique clinical skills, program development/management skills, and evaluation skills.

An individual's mental, physical, environment, and social / cultural characteristics are all intricately intertwined and can affect his / her health in many ways. Social workers provide a unique perspective on patient care that takes on a holistic approach to address each aspect of the patient's life. This approach helps to increase the quality of care provided, coordinate services better, improve patient and physician satisfaction, and decrease healthcare costs. Social workers are needed in the outpatient medical setting to help improve the care for the patients and benefit the healthcare clinics overall.

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