



Educere
BCM Journal of Social Work
ISSN 2249-1090
Vol 19 Issue 2
December 2023
<https://bcmcollege.ac.in/pications/educere>

A critical assessment of professional social work practice in cancer prevention, care, treatment and programmes

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Abstract

This article presents the role of professional social workers in cancer prevention, care, support and treatment services and programmes. As we know Cancer is one of the most prevalent reasons for death, it refers to uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells anywhere in the body. People living with cancer may face many social, psychological and economic problems, and there are very few government cancer treatment hospitals available in Andhra Pradesh. Social Work is a practice-based profession that promotes social change and development; it helps individuals, groups and communities to help themselves. A research study was conducted in Visakhapatnam to understand the existing social work practices in Cancer hospitals. The study selected 50 respondents through convenience sampling methods and interaction to understand different social work practices. The data was collected in the month of March 2023. The study found that the awareness levels on cancer disease are very low in rural and tribal areas when compared with urban areas. Many social workers are working in this area as social case workers, social group workers, community organizers, social activists, social welfare administrators, social research-

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ers, counsellors, communicators, educators etc. There is plenty of scope to create awareness on cancer to the general public and also to provide care, support and treatment to persons living with cancer. This study suggested 23 types of activities and responsibilities of social workers in cancer prevention, care and treatment settings. There are very few Government and NGO programmes available to cancer patients. Therefore, there is a need for more interventions from the Government and NGOs on the increasing roles of social workers in Oncology treatment. The universities and the colleges of social worker should start a specialisation on Oncology-Social Work for in-depth study of social work practice in Oncology.

Key Words: *Cancer, Social Work profession, health care, Medical Social Work, oncology*

Introduction

Cancer is a complex group of diseases characterized by the uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells. These cells can invade and destroy healthy tissues in the body. Cancer can occur in any part of the body and can develop from various cell types. The National Cancer Registry Programme - India estimated that the number of incident cases of cancer in India for the year 2022 was found to be 14,61,427 (crude rate:100.4 per 100,000). In India, one in nine people are likely to develop cancer in his/her lifetime. The cancer incidences are continuing to increase, and these estimates will be helpful in planning cancer prevention and control activities through the intervention of early detection, risk reduction and management (National Cancer Institute, 2021).

Types of cancer

There are many types of cancer, which can affect different parts of the body. Here are some common types of cancer:

1. **Breast Cancer:** A cancer that forms in the cells of the breast. It is the most common cancer among women worldwide.

2. **Lung Cancer:** A type of cancer that starts in the lungs, usually in the cells lining the air passages.
3. **Colorectal Cancer:** Cancer that develops in the colon or rectum, often beginning as a polyp or abnormal growth of tissue.
4. **Prostate Cancer:** A cancer that occurs in the prostate, a small walnut-shaped gland in males that produces seminal fluid.
5. **Skin Cancer:** The most common type of cancer, which develops in the skin's cells, primarily caused by exposure to UV radiation (Cancer Council Act. (2007).
6. **Leukemia:** A cancer of the blood-forming tissues, including the bone marrow and the lymphatic system.
7. **Pancreatic Cancer:** A cancer that starts in the pancreas, an organ located behind the stomach, known for its poor prognosis.
8. **Ovarian Cancer:** A cancer that begins in the ovaries, which are the female reproductive organs responsible for producing eggs.
9. **Brain Cancer:** A tumour or abnormal growth of cells in the brain or spinal cord.
10. **Lymphoma:** A type of cancer that starts in the lymphatic system, a part of the body's immune system (Ngcebo & Abraham, 2023).

Social Work profession

The International Federation of Social Workers (2014) define social work as “Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge’s, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has defined the profession of social work in the following way (NASW, 2017): Social workers are professionals who enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, especially the most vulnerable. They work to empower individuals, families, groups, and communities to reach their full potential, while advocating for social justice and social change to create a more equitable and just society. Social workers may find employment in various settings, including government agencies, non-profit organizations, hospitals, schools, community centres, and private practice. In which practice consists of the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to one or more of the following ends:

- Helping people obtain tangible services (such as housing, food, income)
- Providing counselling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups
- Helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services.
- Participating in relevant legislative processes.

This article presents the role of professional social workers in cancer prevention, care, support and treatment.

Review of literature

In a study by **The Association of Oncology Social Work (2020)**, mentioned that the Oncology social workers have historically performed a wide range of services to support cancer patients from diagnosis through long-term survival. Working within frameworks informed by the bio-psychosocial model and person-in-environment ecological theory. They have supported cancer patients and their families via screening and assessment of cancer-related problems, providing direct individual, family and group psychotherapy related to adjustment to illness, provision of resource referrals and discharge planning services, as well as advocacy for patient and family needs at the micro and macro levels.

Rosalie Picket (2020), study investigated the reasons those affected by a cancer diagnosis were referred to social workers and the types of interventions undertaken. Findings of significance were that residential location, socio economic status, gender, relationship status, responsibilities for dependent children, and other complex individual circumstances were key reasons for referral to social workers. The study outcomes indicate that social workers have a significant role in the provision of effective psychosocial cancer care.

The Association of Oncology Social Workers AOSW (2018) study reported that the social worker's participation as part of the multidisciplinary team usually begins at the time of the patient's initial diagnosis and continues throughout the disease trajectory. Oncology social workers help the team move beyond focusing exclusively on disease processes, but to take a broader view of other practical matters that may significantly affect an individual's quality of life. They also provide several vital supports to those coping with cancer, and the local community as well as other healthcare workers. The findings of patients end-of-life care decisions by (Cherlin, 2005), underscored the importance of early social workers' involvement with cancer patients to provide guidance, support, and address emotional aspects of their cancer experiences when their illness evolves. This study also notes that each cancer type follows a different disease and treatment courses that may influence when and how end-of-life issues are being handled. Although most patients seem to have an overall cognitive understanding of their medical conditions, the emotional integration and implications of this understanding might take time to process. Social workers ability to facilitate communication among patients, families, and the medical team is one of their crucial roles in the interdisciplinary treatment team.

Although there are few studies on oncology social work, the results of the literature review showed that there is quite less knowledge on the role of social workers in the psychosocial care of cancer patients. There is scarcity of information on the unique needs of individuals and families dealing with cancer, the critical aspects involving their vulnerability and protection as well as the understanding of the impact and effectiveness of social work interventions in

psychosocial care. There is a lot of scope for social workers to apply social work methods and social work principles with cancer patients and their families to promote effective quality of life (Ngcebo & Abraham, 2023).

Scope of the study

Social work is a practice-based profession and academic discipline by means of which professionals help the helpless and voiceless population, as well as the poor and needy. Cancer is one of the burning health concerns which largely contributes to social problems in India. The persons living with Cancer face many social, psychological and economic problems. There are a very few government cancer treatment hospitals which are available in Andhra Pradesh. This makes awareness levels on the cancer disease very less in rural and tribal areas compared to urban areas. Many social workers work in this area as social case workers, social group workers, community organizers, social activists, social welfare administrators, social researchers, counsellors, communicators, and educators etc. There is more need to create awareness on cancer to the public and also provide the care, support and treatment to persons living with cancer. A few studies were conducted in this area and those studies were also conducted in developed countries. Thus, the present study is conducted to understand the role of social workers in cancer treatment settings.

Objectives

1. To study the existing social work practices in cancer prevention, care and treatment programmes.
2. To find out more social work interventions to promote the quality of life of persons living with cancer

Methodology

This research study was conducted in Visakhapatnam. Visakhapatnam is one of the main cities of Andhra Pradesh and it is a health hub for the north Andhra population as well as Odisha people. There are three familiar hospitals available for Cancer treatment i.e. Homi Baba Cancer Hospital, KGH Hospital

and Mahatma Gandhi Cancer Hospital. The present study selected the respondents from Mahatma Gandhi Cancer Hospital, Visakhapatnam. All the respondents are skin cancer patients and are more than 18 years of age. The research approach of the study is an integrated research approach; both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The study adopted a descriptive research design and applied a convenience sampling method. The study selected 50 respondents and interacted with them to understand the social work practice. Three months consecutive field work practice and supervision is also helped the researchers to understand the social workers role in Oncology. The data was collected in the month of March 2023. This article presents the role of social workers in the cancer treatment setting.

Social Work implications in a cancer setting

Some common areas of social work are explored in various cancer settings, focusing on understanding the psychosocial, emotional, and practical challenges faced by cancer patients (Vachon, 2018). Social workers play a vital role in advancing knowledge, improving interventions, and enhancing the overall care and support provided to cancer patients and their families. They contribute in various ways:

1. **Awareness:** Social workers should create awareness and knowledge on cancer, modes of transmission and treatment facilities.
2. **Counselling:** There is a need to conduct pre and post-test counselling; and pre-treatment and post-treatment continuously. It is important that Counselling or debriefing is not neglected for cancer patients, and perhaps close family members, in order to address and support their concerns and fears around the shock, treatment challenges and possibly also accepting and working through scarring and lifestyle of consciousness to prevent skin cancer and frequent check-ups. It helps cancer patients to be relieved from trauma.
1. **Mental health Services:** Social workers are often part of mental health teams that provides therapeutic interventions and support to individuals

dealing with mental health disorders. Therefore, they have a role in supporting individuals and families as Mental health may heighten in cancer patients therefore the need for emotional support, counseling, and practical assistance to individuals and families affected by cancer and other challenging life situations which they may face.

2. **Case management:** Social workers often perform case management duties for cancer patients. This involves assessing clients' needs, developing care plans, coordinating services, and ensuring that clients have access to the resources that they require.
3. **Screening file:** Social workers work on screening files. This applies to newly admitted patients. They don't know whether they have cancer or not. Here, social workers help patients to undergo various tests to identify cancer. The tests are complete blood count, MRI, Ultrasound, Biopsy and mammography.
4. **Crisis intervention:** Social workers are trained to respond to crisis and emergencies, providing immediate support and helping individuals and communities cope with traumatic events. Crisis interventions may be required in cases such as a recurrence of cancer or treatment complications, social workers may provide crisis counseling to help individuals to cope with the immediate challenges.
5. **Community development:** Social workers have a role to play in recognizing that a cancer diagnosis can affect the entire society. They need to engage in community development efforts by working with communities to identify their strengths and needs and promoting collaboration to create programs that address clients' needs and also to create awareness on cancer.
6. **Family support:** Social workers offer support to the families of cancer patients through identifying that a cancer diagnosis can affect the entire family system. They also facilitate communication and coping strategies to strengthen family resilience during the time of treatment.

7. **Child welfare:** When a child is diagnosed with cancer, it can significantly impact the entire family. Social workers are there to provide emotional support, navigate the healthcare system, advocate for the child's best interests, and ensure the family's overall well-being. Social workers focus on protecting children from abuse and neglect, ensuring their safety, and supporting families in crisis to promote reunification or provide alternative care options (Hepworth, 2016).
8. **Medical and healthcare support:** Social workers in healthcare settings work with patients and their families to address psychosocial needs, provide emotional support, and help navigate the complexities of the healthcare system.
9. **Resource navigators:** Cancer treatment can be financially burdensome. Hence, Social workers assist patients to access financial resources, such as insurance covers, disability benefits, and community support programs. They may also help individuals' access community resources and services, such as housing assistance, food banks, healthcare, and educational programs. Social workers work to ensure that cancer patients receive all the support they require.
10. **End-of-Life Care:** In cases where a patient's condition is terminal, for example when a patient is diagnosed with stage IV cancer, social workers may provide support for end-of-life care planning and facilitate discussions about patients' preferences. After a patient's passing, they offer bereavement support to the family as well (Sherman & Edwards, 2019).
11. **Education and Information:** Social workers help patients and families understand their medical conditions, treatment options, and potential side effects. They ensure that the clients have access to accurate and relevant information to make informed decisions about their care
12. **Assessment:** Social workers conduct comprehensive assessments of the patients' psychosocial needs and they develop and strategize supportive care plans that are tailored to address those needs. This may include assis-

tance with coping strategies, stress management, and enhancing social support networks.

13. **Collaboration:** Social workers also collaborate with other professionals in oncology settings, such as psychologists, doctors, educators, and community organizations, to ensure a holistic and comprehensive approach to their clients' needs.
14. **Respect for diversity and cultural competence:** Social workers need to recognize and respect the diversity of their clients' backgrounds, cultures, and identities (Travado, 2019). They should strive to provide culturally competent and sensitive services that acknowledge and address the unique needs and perspectives of cancer patients. Social workers also need to ensure that they recognize the impact of cultural beliefs and practices on a patient's experience of cancer.
15. **Trauma-informed care:** Social workers approach their work with cancer patients through a trauma-informed lens, recognizing the potential impact of past traumas on their clients' lives and integrating trauma-sensitive practices into their cancer-based interventions.
16. **Confidentiality and ethical practice:** Social workers adhere to strict ethical guidelines of ensuring client confidentiality, maintaining professional boundaries and acting in the best interests of their clients at all times (NASW, 2020). This may also help build trust between the professionals and patients, which is essential for effective cancer treatment and care.
17. **Care coordination:** Social workers work closely with the healthcare team to coordinate care and address psychosocial factors that may impact treatment outcomes. By coordinating care across various domains and ensuring that the patient's psychosocial needs are met, social workers enhance the overall well-being and quality of life of cancer patients (AOSW, 2023).
18. **Support groups and peer counseling:** Social workers may facilitate support groups or peer counseling sessions where patients can connect with others facing similar challenges, fostering a sense of community, understanding and also addressing social isolation among cancer patients.

19. **Community referrals:** Social workers connect patients with community resources and services, such as transportation assistance, home care, and local support organizations (AOSW, 2023)
20. **Advocacy:** Social workers should create an alert on government welfare programmes meant for cancer patients by ensuring that their rights are upheld and that they receive fair treatment and access to essential services. They should design new interventions for the prevention, care, and treatment of cancer patients.
21. **Policy analysis:** The social work departments should start a specialization on social work practice in cancer settings where there are many job opportunities available for oncology social workers. This can extend to advocating for policy changes and social justice on a broader scale (SWPI).
22. **Research:** Some social workers engage in research to identify social problems, evaluate interventions, and contribute to evidence-based practices. By contributing to the body of knowledge in this field, social workers play a critical role in improving the care and support provided to individuals affected by cancer.

Government schemes for the welfare of cancer patients

- 1) **Rashtriya Arogya Nidhi:** It is a central government scheme to provide financial assistance to the poor patients living under below poverty line. This scheme available in regional cancer hospitals. The social worker need to help the patient in applying to this scheme in online mode. The documents required for this scheme are income certificate, ration card, two photos and estimation cost. After applying in online mode, social workers need to send required original documents to Delhi office by post. There is a need to do follow-up calls every week to Delhi health officer till amount sanctioned to the patients.
- 2) **Prime Minister relief fund:** It is central government scheme. Documents required are the same as above but in this scheme amount sanctioned will

be half of the estimation. But time to get amount was short compare to Rashtriya Arogya Nidhi.

- 3) **YSR Arogyasri:** It is Andhra Pradesh government scheme. It will apply to patients having white civil supply ration card only. Social Workers should guide the patients to register in the scheme. Now the Gram/ward Secretariats are functioning in Andhra Pradesh and the below poverty line people are easily accessing the Arogyasri card. In this scheme patients need to take approval from government for every step like chemo, radiation and surgery. Individually social worker needs to explain all the procedure to the patients.
- 4) **Chief Minister relief fund:** It is a special financial assistant to the patients from the state government of Andhra Pradesh. If any political representative helps the patient they easily get the support from Chief Minister Relief Fund.
- 5) **NGO interventions:** There are many NGOs are working to create awareness and provide care, support and treatment to the cancer patients in India. They provide individual help and also organize camps to create awareness. They published many Information, Education and Communication material on Cancer. Each State different NGOs are providing the services to the cancer patients.

Conclusion

The role of a social worker is diverse and multifaceted, social workers can be found in various settings, including hospitals, schools, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and private practices. Their primary goal is to assist those in need. In the everyday life of cancer patients, social workers play various roles that contribute to the well-being of cancer patients, as well as and in supporting the needs of those who are facing difficult circumstances, such as grief, trauma, relationship issues, or mental health challenges in cancer care. This study suggested 24 types of activities and responsibilities of social workers in cancer prevention, care and treatment settings. There are very few Govern-

ment and NGO programmes available to cancer patients. Therefore, there is a need for more interventions from the Government and NGOs on the increasing roles of social workers in Oncology treatment. The universities and the colleges of social worker should start a specialisation on Oncology-Social Work for in-depth study of social work practice in Oncology.

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