

The Importance of Health Literacy for Medical Social Workers

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Abstract

In order for the patients to benefit from treatment; informing the health team about patient and his/her family, solving psychological problems, stimulating social support mechanisms to ensure their social functionality, strengthening their harmony with their environment are amongst the roles which medical social workers are to undertake. The competencies of medical social workers in this field are closely related to their levels of health literacy so as to perform these roles. Because the skills of medical social workers to obtain, understand, interpret and use health-related information in micro, mezzo and macro level interventions are important measures of health literacy level. A medical social worker with a low level of health literacy can advise patients and their relatives within his/her (informal) health knowledge. However, this health information which has not been acquired by formal education carries the risk of harm to the patients. This may lead to the weakening the controls of the patient over their health, thus the weakening of their adaptation skills. It is possible to say that social workers cannot contribute to the reduction of health inequalities without mastering the knowledge and skills of health, and will even induce to reinforcement of these inequalities. From this point of view, the objective of current review study is to explain the importance of health literacy levels of medical social workers for medical social work practices on the basis of information, skills and value of social work.

Keywords: ethics, health information, skills, social services, values.

1. Introduction

Many professions in the field of healthcare evaluate the condition of the patients by using the medical model. This model is an approach which evaluates the patient only based on his/her objective data and therefore neglects the psychosocial well-being of the patient (Doak, 2015). The biopsychosocial model tries to understand the patient within his/her environment and evaluates his/her needs in a holistic manner (Beder, 2006, Yılmaz and Erdem, 2016). Knowledge on social systems and evidence-based practice skills give medical social workers the opportunity to undertake many roles in the field of health (Andrews et al., 2013). In order for the patients to benefit from treatment; informing the health team about patient and his/her family, solving psychological problems, stimulating social support mechanisms to ensure their social functionality, strengthening their harmony with their environment are amongst the roles which medical social workers are to undertake. The competencies of medical social workers are closely related to their levels of health literacy so as to perform these roles while working with the individual, family, group, organization and community. Because the skills of medical social workers to obtain, understand, interpret and use health-related information in micro, mezzo and macro level interventions are important measures of health literacy level. A medical social worker with a low level of health literacy can advise patients and their relatives within his/her (informal) health knowledge. However, this health information which has not been acquired by formal education carries the risk of harm to the patients. This may lead to the weakening the controls of the patient over their health, thus the weakening of their adaptation skills. It is possible to say that social workers cannot contribute to the reduction of health inequalities without mastering the knowledge and skills of health, and will even induce to reinforcement of these inequalities. From this point of view, the objective of current review study is to explain the importance of health literacy levels of medical social workers for medical social work practices on the basis of information, skills and value of social work.

2. Health Literacy and Medical Social Work

Since the chances of people to have an access to opportunities and resources are not equal; social injustice, especially experienced by vulnerable groups, is at the centre of social work interventions. In order to ensure social justice, accessibility to resources, opportunities and services is significant (Küçükcaraca, 2013; Çoban-Kaynak, 2017).

Health literacy is not only about access to health services. In addition to access to health services, it is also closely related to the use of health information and skill-base in practice of this information. In a sense, access to the information required for maintaining and improvement of health, level of competence and skill to understand and use this information can be discussed in relation to health literacy (Nutbeam, 2000; Selden et al., 2000).

Ethical codes and value-base play an important role in identifying problem areas of social work. It can be understood by considering these ethical codes and values that low level health literacy is a problem that should be addressed by medical social workers (Singleton, 2003; Yılmaz-Dileköz & Kumbasar, 2004). Social workers are responsible for supporting the client's well-being, dignity, self esteem, and self-determination right as well as and strengthening his/her capacity to meet the needs of the client. In particular, medical social workers are responsible for providing information to health care team about the responses which the client gives to the treatment and his/her disease. Social workers also help clients within health environment to function in their social environment; yet, these clients might be unfamiliar with the terminology and expectations of medical culture. Because medical culture has its own specific institutions,

opportunities, language, traditions, beliefs, practices, policies, diagnostic tests, test equipment, values and stakeholders that maintain hierarchical relationships based on the profession. These clients in the health care system are expected to comply with the instructions and maintenance plans of health service providers. However, these clients may not understand the instructions of health service providers about health and health care. Since medical social workers are obliged to know the medical culture and language, they are also responsible for implementing and developing health literacy strategies to enable the client to understand complex health information (Lennon-Dearing, 2013).

Medical social workers try to provide service in a interdisciplinary team for more than a century in line with professional values and principles. Using a biopsychosocial model, they have to adopt a holistic approach for maintaining and improving of health as well as prevention of diseases, and undertake responsibilities in the health team by pursuing ethical codes and professional values (Maramaldi et al., 2014; Özcan and Özden, 2017). Medical social workers are also responsible for facilitating the access to health services for vulnerable groups and individuals by conducting informative and awareness raising activities in line with the requirements (Uçan et al., 2015).

Health literacy skills are required for medical social workers both to maintain and sustain their own well-beings and also to gain competence to provide service to their clients (Stanhope et al., 2015). That the social workers can communicate with the patients and their relatives and use the common language with health personnel enables them to be more efficient in the field of health. High level of health literacy of social workers bring about positive impact on the medical social work interventions in micro (increase of self-esteem of the client), mezzo (enabling efficient use of health resources in hospitals) and macro (reduction of health inequalities) levels (Liechty, 2011).

Medical social workers are also required to be able to use the role of researcher to identify the needs of patients and to address the diseases. Their research skills play an important role for evidence-based practice information in maintaining and improving of health. They can contribute for the patients to benefit from health care services in the optimal way with the roles of counselor, advocate and connector person (Parast and Allaii, 2014).

Education which social workers have received concerning the determinants of health, health beliefs and experiences of clients may be limited. Social workers can direct their clients with inadequate, inaccurate, and irrelevant-to-their-conditions information based on their inaccurate information or personal experience (Singleton, 2003). Medical social workers need to be health literates themselves, in particular in order to level the health literacy of their clients up. For this reason, that social workers gain health literacy skills and have accurate health information is significant in terms of effectively performing the medical social work interventions in the levels of the individual, group, family and the society (Stanhope et al., 2015).

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

Medical social workers are responsible for carrying out interventions for the individual, family, group, organization and community by using knowledge, skill and value-base in intervention levels (in micro, mezzo and macro levels) and intervention phases (engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, termination). The success of medical social workers in these interventions is closely related to the fact that they are health literate. Because it is not possible for a medical social worker who is not health literate to understand the medical culture

and language, and also it is very difficult for him to recognise the client with low level of health literacy, to know about the causes of low level of health literacy as well as what to focus on in the intervention, and to manage such a case. In this context, it is possible to say that social workers cannot contribute to the reduction of health inequalities without mastering the knowledge and skills of health, and will even induce to reinforcement of these inequalities. Hence; it is required especially in the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula to include the subjects such as public health, health reform, behavioural health, and global health, which will contribute for medical social workers to be health literate. Thus, it can be understood that health literacy is closely concerned not only with the interventions at micro level, but also particularly with education, health and social policies at mezzo and macro levels. Moreover, the role of social workers in achieving global health goals for the struggle against health inequalities can be comprehended better thanks to such an education.

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