

# HEALTH AND WELL-BEING: A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

Health is also becoming more accepted as a multidimensional concept that is not only influenced by biological aspects and medical treatment but also by social, economic and environments in which individuals reside. The paper discusses the social work concept of health as it puts into consideration the role of social determinants, health inequalities and social justice in interpreting health outcomes. In the paper, the author discusses the importance of social work within health care environments with an emphasis on the interventions at the individual, group, and community levels. It talks about the main approaches of social work, which involve casework, group work and community organisation, and touches on ethics, directing the practice of health professionals. Resource constraints, role confusion, emotional requirements, and systems barriers, which health social workers face, are also critically discussed. The paper suggests that social work is crucial in the context of reducing health inequalities and building health systems; hence, it takes a holistic and humanistic approach. Social work approach combines psychosocial support with advocacy and community involvement, thus covering the short-term and long-term health requirements and structural issues. The conclusion of the paper restates the argument about the necessity of having inclusive and equitable health systems that acknowledge social work as a constituent of health care. The policies of health that should be strengthened focus on the social work practice in order to have the comprehensive and sustainable health and well-being of all.

**Keywords:** Health and Well-Being, Social Work Perspective, Social Determinants of Health, Holistic Health, Social Justice.

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of health is mostly given out as the lack of disease. This is the limited perspective that does not reflect the realities that are complex in determining the well-being of people (Engel, 1977). People are not

healthy beings but instead, their health itself is highly affected by their social, economic, environmental and cultural status (Cacioppo and Hawkey, 2003). Poverty, education, family support, gender relations, employment and

service access are considered the factors that define who can be healthy and who can be prone to illness (Vlassoff, 2007; Mechanic and Tanner, 2007). It is important to realise these interacting influences in order to come up with a more holistic perspective on health.

The traditional biomedical model is very general with diagnosis, treatment, and cure with little regard to the larger social context of illness (Engel, 2012). Although medical interventions play a critical role, they cannot only solve the underlying causes of most illnesses (Hawe, 2015). Another and supplementary approach is social work which considers health as a product of social relationships, structural conditions and experiences in life. This school of thought focuses on prevention, psychosocial assistance, empowerment, and social justice as well as medical treatment (Green and McDermott, 2010).

Considering the social work perspective, health is not just a clinical outcome but a human right and dignity issue (Becker, 2021, Auslander, 2001). The health disparities in both access and outcome are indicative of underlying social disparities and that is why health is a significant field of concern when it comes to social work practice and policy. Social workers deal with the individuals, families, groups and communities so that they can minimise the barriers and enhance coping skills as well as promote individuals to have fair health systems (Auslander, 2001).

This paper will discuss the social perspective of health by understanding the social aspect of health, the role of social workers in the health context and the need to take care of structural inequalities. Through holistic and humanistic approach, the article brings to the fore the role of social work in promoting inclusive, equitable and sustainable health and well-being of all people.

### **The Social Approach to the Concept of Health**

A social approach to health acknowledges the fact that material health is largely linked with social interaction, psychological, cultural stability, and financial stability (Eckersley, 2001). The perception that people have about being described as healthy is not always similar across societies, communities, and various life phases that represent different social values and experiences (Zautra et al., 2010).

In this perspective, all social situations in daily life such as food supply, housing, sanitation, education, employment and family services are influential in health. These elements relate with individual behaviours and biological states to give rise to varying health results. Two persons with the same medical condition might also be subjected to different health outcomes, depending on their social support systems, resource availability, and capacity to handle stress (Morcillo et al., 2019). Therefore, health cannot exist outside of the social realities that define the choice and the opportunity of individuals (Williams, 2003).

The social approach also places emphasis on the impact of culture and social norms on the health practices and beliefs. The cultural perceptions have an impact on the way individuals perceive sickness, the places and the times they seek medical attention as well as the effectiveness with which they executed their treatment plans (Vaughn et al., 2009). Social stigma, discrimination, and exclusion may further affect health by putting services out of reach and undermining social ties. In this respect, health is more of a social product and a personal experience (Stangl et al., 2019).

The social perspective considers health to be dynamic and not a static state. It is concerned with the capability of people and communities to be able to adapt, cope and live productively

in their social environment. Social relationships, networks in the community and organisations that support, contribute significantly to the well-being and resilience (Zautra et al., 2010).

Using a social approach, health is considered a collective responsibility which extends beyond the healthcare system. It suggests joint work in the social, economic, and policy spheres to establish the conditions under which individuals could lead healthy and decent lives (Sacks et al., 2019). This realisation constitutes the requirement of social work practice in health that aspires to meet the needs of the individuals as well as the greater social systems that influence health (Gough 2004).

### The Social Determinants of Health

As it has been stated in the section above, biological determinism and medical attention are not the only factors that influence health outcomes but also the social factor under which individuals are born, raised, live, work and age (Braveman et al., 2011). All these factors, commonly known as the social determinants of health, have an impact on the capacity of people to ensure well-being, access resources, and be exposed to risks (Ferrer, 2018). The knowledge of these factors is not only important in the social work perspective since it demystifies the varied health patterns across the communities and social groups.



**Figure 1: Upstream and downstream determinants of Health, Adopted from Braveman et al., (2011)**

One of the greatest determinants of health is economic status. The income level influences accessibility to healthy food, good housing, proper education, and health facilities (James, 1997). Simultaneously, education is significant in the process of molding health consciousness and life prospects. Environmental factors including social and physical environments also affect health. Gender, caste, ethnic, and social exclusion inequalities are other factors that influence health experiences, particularly in societies that are characterised by structural inequality. Stigma and discrimination may restrict access to care and make people unwilling to find prompt support. They are often combined in a way that certain groups are more susceptible to health issues due to these kinds of socioeconomic disadvantages (Nandi and Schneider, 2014).

Viewing health in the perspective of social determinants, one is easily able to realise that health problems are never failures of an individual but rather the consequence of a more extensive social construct. These determinants require collective action, policy interventions and community-based approaches (Williams, 2003). Social work is not only important in identifying and mitigating such underlying social problems because of its insensitivity to equity, empowerment, and social justice (Craig, 2002).

### Social Justice and Health Inequality

Health inequality can be defined as the unfair distribution of health outcomes, access to health care and health status of various categories of the population. The existence of such disparities is not accidental, but, in fact, it is closely intertwined with the political, social, and economic regimes that advantage certain groups of people at the expense of others (McCartney et al., 2019). In terms of social work, this kind of disparity is so unfair in the fact that it is not due to individual

decisions but exclusively to various circumstances of prevention and systematic social occurrences (Lundy, 2004).

Health inequalities are commonly linked to income, education, gender, caste, region and social identity. Besides sickness, malnutrition, disability, and premature death have higher rates in the marginalised communities, there are usually barriers posed to access to high-quality healthcare. Lack of information, financial constraints, discrimination and paucity of health facilities further contribute to the existence of these gaps. These trends show that inequalities in the field of health are a manifestation of greater socioeconomic injustices (Ahmad and Mahapatro, 2023; Kapilasharmi et al., 2015).

The social justice in health is centered on equity, fairness, and equal opportunity to achieve the maximum level of health by all people (Ruger, 2004). It requires the recognition of health as a fundamental human right, and not a privilege (Hyden, 2012). Socially equitable health care can serve disadvantaged populations by eradicating structural, enhancing accessibility and affordability of care, and promoting inclusive policies (Butkus, 2020).

Socially, there is need to focus on health disparities through both the intervention of a system and through direct practice. Social workers help individuals and families to overcome barriers to care, access healthcare systems and to manage sickness at a micro level. To fight unfair practices and promote equitable allocation of health resources, they also participate in community mobilisation, macro-level policy-making (McGregor et al., 2018; Steketee et al., 2017; Auslander, 2016). Socially justifying health also entails the empowerment of communities to take part in decision making processes that have impacts on their well-being. Interventions are responsive and sustainable when individuals increase their voices in the formulation of

health policies and services. With this, to decrease health disparities, it is necessary to implement not medical interventions but social change, focused on the establishment of fair and equal opportunities to health and well-being (Varcoe et al., 2014; Ruger, 2004).

### **The Method of Social Work in Health**

Healthcare social work is based on various approaches and methods that are aimed at meeting the complex and interdependent needs of individuals, families, groups and communities. These methods acknowledge that health issues are psychologically, socially and environmentally affected and thus they need intervention other than medical care. The combination of various practices helps social workers to encourage comprehensive care and well-being sustainability (SocialWorkLicensure.Org, 2017, cited in Keaton, 2022).

Casework is an inherent approach to health environments, and it is aimed at resolving personal issues. Casework helps a social worker to study the social history of a person, emotional status, family dynamics, and available resources to comprehend their impact on health. The individuals are assisted in coping with illness, supporting treatment, and making informed decisions regarding their health through counselling, crisis intervention, and care planning (McCoyed et al., 2016; Allen and Spitzer, 2015).

The main way of practising social work is also group work (Schwartz, 1986). Patients with a chronic condition, mental health issues, and common life experiences can also enjoy the benefit of learning and emotional support within a support group (Worrall et al., 2018). Groups in health education have a significant role to play in creating awareness, advising healthy behaviours and ensuring that stigmas of some conditions are eliminated. The group environment helps to feel a sense of belonging and strength, which may have a beneficial

impact on the resilience and recovery (Elwyn et al., 2018).

These community-based strategies are essential for addressing health issues on a larger scale (Wilson et al., 2012). Social workers involve communities in the process of identifying health-related needs, mobilising local resources, and health action and health planning. This approach is beneficial in facilitating supportive environments that support preventive and promotive healthcare through awareness programs and capacity building, as well as community leadership development (Allen and Spitzer, 2015; Gehlert and Browne, 2011; NASW, 2016).

Besides the above, social workers usually utilise integrated, strengths-based, and systems-oriented approaches. All these approaches aim at the abilities of people and communities as opposed to their weaknesses and include the relationship between people and their surroundings. Through these various practices and strategies, social work within the healthcare can guarantee holistic work interventions that go beyond the direct health issues to the underlying societal issues that influence well-being (Miller et al., 2017).

### **The Role of Social Workers in Healthcare**

Social workers can perform various roles to benefit the client, as described below:

#### *Psychosocial Assessment*

Social workers determine the emotional, family, financial, and social status of patients to know the factors influencing illness and recovery.

#### *Emotional Support and Counselling*

They also offer counselling to patients and families to enable them handle stress, chronic diseases, fear, disability, and problems associated with treatment.

#### *Patient Advocacy*

The social workers safeguard the rights of the patients through obtaining informed consent, confidentiality, equitable treatment, and access to relevant health services.

#### *Connection with Resources and Welfare Schemes*

They link patients to government health schemes, financial assistance, insurance, Non-Governmental Organisation and community-based support systems.

#### *Discharge Planning and Continuity of Care*

Social workers assist in the discharge planning, which includes the coordination of the follow up treatment, rehabilitation services, home care, and family preparedness.

#### *Crisis Intervention*

They also step in during medical emergencies, suicidal attempts, domestic violence, trauma or unexpected diagnosis, which involves immediate psychosocial assistance.

Vulnerable and Marginalised Groups Support  
Social workers guarantee that care is inclusive to children, the elderly, women, and persons with disabilities and the poor.

#### *Health Education and Awareness*

They train patients and communities on disease prevention, adherence to treatment, mental health, hygiene, and lifestyles (Tadic et al., 2020; Browne, 2019; Ashcroft et al., 2018).

#### *Social Work, Values and Ethics*

Healthcare social work practice is grounded on professional values and ethics. The values help social workers to make responsible choices, uphold professional integrity, and provide respectful and fair practice with individuals, families, and communities. Ethical

behaviour is especially significant in accounting situations in a healthcare environment, where a person can feel vulnerable (Banks, 2020).

One of the basic ethics of social work is respect of dignity and worth of the person. Social workers do not perceive individuals in terms of cases and diagnoses, but as individuals. This principle includes the recognition of the experiences, beliefs, cultural backgrounds of the clients and treating them with empathy and without judgment. It also includes counter-instructive behaviours within health systems that marginalise and dehumanise individuals (Saleebey, 2002; IFSW, 2018).

Self-determination is another critical professional ethics that has focuses on the right of people to make informed choices regarding their lives and health. The social workers do not challenge the decisions made by their clients even when they do not follow the opinions of the experts but help them to understand their options and consequences. It is associated with this concept, which implies advancing autonomy in healthcare and informed consent (IFSW, 2018).

Privacy and confidentiality are critical with regard to ethical duties of health-related social work (Reamer, 2018). Social workers receive sensitive personal information, and they must ensure that neither they abuse it nor disclose it unauthorisedly. Confidentiality encourages trust and makes individuals feel free to seek assistance. According to the requirements of ethics and the law, social workers should find the golden mean between the principles of confidentiality and the need to ensure that the person is not exposed to harmful effects (NASW, 2021).

Professional competence and accountability is another vital element of ethics. The social workers are supposed to work within the boundaries of their profession, they are supposed to learn the skills required and they are supposed to have the latest information.

Social workers can offer effective and responsible healthcare assistance with the help of cultural sensitivity, ethical reflection, and adherence to the professional standards (IFSW, 2018).

All these ethics, considered collectively, help to ensure that the social work practice in the health-related field is humanistic, rights-based, and socially just, hence promoting moral and compassionate medical care (Gehlert and Browne, 2011).

### Health Social Work Practice Issues

There are a number of challenges in social work practice in the context of health settings, which influence the effectiveness and viability of interventions. All these difficulties are supported by structural constraints, institutional constraints and the intricacy of health-related issues. It is necessary to understand these challenges in order to reinforce social work practice in healthcare systems (Gardner and Zodikoff, 2003).

A shortage of resources, such as lack of sufficient staffing, financing and a deficiency of infrastructure, is one of the greatest challenges. Social workers have busy schedules and have to cope with numerous cases, which do not provide time to evaluate, follow-up, preventive work. The lack of resources may limit the provision of support services, and it is hard to address the needs of various patients and populations, which is especially true in the context of community health (Dgielewski and Holliman 2019).

Emotions and ethical issues are the other challenges that health social workers face in their practice. Working with chronically ill, disabled, traumatised, or end-of-life patients may have an emotional toll and result in stress and emotional burnout. The moral principles, including the confidentiality and autonomy of the client, and the institutional policies and legal demands also contribute to the complexity of the practice (Reamer, 2018).

The other major issue is the ignorance and not acknowledgment of social work role in healthcare teams. This can be perceived as a lack of involvement in making decisions and role ambiguity in social work in some environments, where medical treatment is considered paramount to the social work. It may decrease the possibility of interdisciplinary cooperation and make it difficult to integrate psychosocial care with health services (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft 2016; Dziegielewski and Holliman 2019).

There are also challenges of social and cultural barriers. Stigmatising of mental illness, HIV/AIDS, disability or even some social identity may deter anyone to seek help or stick to treatment. The communication between the social workers and the service users can be hindered by language barriers, cultural beliefs, and poor health literacy (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2014). Finally, social work interventions are often constrained at the policy level and in the system as a whole. Poor health policies, disjointed services, and poor coordination among sectors may undermine efforts in the social determinants of health. The organisational support, policy change, capacity building, and increased appreciation of social work as an inseparable part of healthcare are needed to address these challenges (Marmot et al., 2008).

### **Way Forward: Social Work in the Field of Health Strengthening**

Elaborating on the discussion above, the following recommendations are meant to improve social work practice at the health care facilities. These suggestions are based on the available literature, specifically Gehlert and Browne (2011), Giles (2007), Zheng et al. (2021), and Thomas and Roy (2024).

*This can be accomplished by adopting a Multi-Level Approach*

Enhancement of practice social work in health settings, needs to be coordinated on individual, institutional, community and policy levels. The clinical level is not the best approach to health problems but must be supplemented with social, economic, and environmental factors that affect well-being.

### *Capacity Building and Lifelong Professional Training*

The practice requires continuous education in the field of public health, mental health, health policies, research skills, and technology utilisation. Periodic trainings are a way of keeping social workers abreast and receptive to emerging health issues.

### *Enhancing Fieldwork and Practice-based Learning*

Practical skills are developed through enhanced field work practice in hospitals, community health centres as well as in public health programmes. Interdisciplinary learning fosters cooperation with doctors and nurses as well as other allied professionals in delivering holistic care.

### *Inclusion of Social Work in Health Systems*

The social workers must play an active role in designing, implementing and evaluating health programmes. The definition of roles and institutional acknowledgment can make psychosocial care an aspect of health services.

### *Community Involvement and Empowerment*

The involvement of communities in identifying health needs and designing social work interventions will encourage ownership and sustainability. The social workers also enable leadership in the community, strengthen health awareness and promote preventive and promotional health programs.

### *The Social Justice Orientation and Policy*

### *Advocacy*

Social workers are significant in raising social determinants of health and promoting fair health policies. They can make a difference through the involvement of the policymakers and the civil society organisations in making changes that can make healthcare more accessible and affordable.

### *Application of Research and Evidence-Based Practice*

Enhancing research abilities will empower social workers to record the outcomes of their practices, reveal identified service gaps, and make contributions to health planning. Evidence-based interventions make the social work practice more effective and credible.

### *Rights-Based and Holistic Practice*

The human rights and approaches that focus on human rights and dignity will help in making sure that equality, inclusion, and ethical values are observed in health services. Holistic practice is concerned with physical, psychological, social and cultural aspects of health.

## **CONCLUSION**

In order to emphasise the fact that health is a complex term that is determined by social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors, this paper views health through the lens of social work. It focused on issues of how structural inequities, health disparities and social factors can influence health outcomes, often making vulnerable populations more susceptible. It also described the various functions, strategies, and ethics of social work in the healthcare field and obstacles encountered in the field, as well as the necessity of enhanced systems and capabilities.

The social work approach is the only way of attaining holistic health. The social work approach recognises individuals as

components of families, community, and social structures, unlike approaches that are very medical. It incorporates clinical care with psychosocial support, empowerment, prevention and advocacy, thus improving both short-term health issues and long-term social issues that influence health. Such a plan makes medical care focus on social justice, human rights, and dignity rather than disease management.

Inclusive, equitable and non-discriminatory health systems are becoming requirements. This can be accomplished through more interdisciplinary collaboration, policies covering social inequalities, and more re-evaluation of social work as an essential element of healthcare. With empowered social work practice in health systems, one can shift towards a paradigm of compassionate, accessible, and equitable healthcare to all members of society.

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