

**COVID-19 AND THE CHALLENGES OF MEDICAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

AGBA, IKWEN STEPHEN
Assistant Chief Social Welfare Officer
Social Welfare Services Department
Federal Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital, Calabar
+234-8066760151
Email: Ikwenagba@gmail.com

&

ADIE, JULIANA JEROME
Faculty of Social Science
Department of Social Work
University of Calabar, Calabar
+2347068651105
Email:Julianaadie@gmail.com

&

IFEYINWA ROSELINE OBEKI
Medical Social Services Department
University of Benin Teaching Hospital,
Benin City, Edo State.
Email: ifyobeki3@gmail.com
+2348037108285

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 Pandemic has affected the world in all spheres of life, including the wellbeing of families, individuals, organizations and communities globally.

Interestingly, the place of Social Workers as frontline actors in fighting this Pandemic cannot be over emphasized. The aim of this study therefore was to examine and identify the challenges experienced by Medical Social Workers during this Pandemic in the course of their involvement and interventions. This study adopted a qualitative design utilizing 25 in-dept interviews (IDIs) with Medical Social Workers who are staffs of the Federal Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital Calabar and the University of Calabar teaching hospital, Calabar respectively. The IDIs were analyzed in themes. Findings from the study revealed that some of the Medical Social Workers in the selected hospitals were involved to an extent in the Covid-19 interventions and they encountered several challenges which had affected their levels of intervention. The study recommends the need for the Federal Government and Hospital Management to address the challenges and needs of Medical Social Work Practitioners in order to improve service delivery to all clients in need of care.

Keyword: Covid-19, Medical Social Workers, Hospitals, Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has severe health effects and serious implications for economic growth and social development (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC] (2020). Nigeria as a Country has gotten her own share from the COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged mankind. As at Monday the 28th day of September, 2020 the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) website reported that Nigeria has had 507, 006 tested cases for COVID-19 and 58, 324 were confirmed cases, 7,422 were active cases and an encouraging 49,794 discharged cases while the country has recorded 1,108 deaths from COVID-19.

According to the definition of social work by the International Federation of social work and the International Association of Schools of social work (IFSW, IASSW, 2014).

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. (IFSW, IASSW, 2014). Amongst the sub-discipline of social work includes Medical Social Work. Medical Social Work as a primary method, deals with the bio-psychosocial-spiritual elements of an individual with a problem and assesses the capability and strength of the patients, social support systems and their families, to assist the patient resolve their problems independently. (Hassan M.S. 2016). The roles of Medical Social Workers in hospital settings are enormous with a focus on alleviating and providing professional services to those patients who need psycho-social assistance. (Malik, A & Sarfraz, A. (2012).

Medical Social Workers guides client seeking health services within the health care system and community at large (Limon, 2018). This they do through engaging clients, builds a trusting relationship, assessing the condition of the client, providing appropriate information on COVID-19 and other health needs as well as counseling. However, the Nigerian social work practice has faced many challenges that have hindered medical social workers in actively carry out this role. Okoye (2019) rightly reported that the improper documentation and poor attention given to social workers in Nigeria has proved that many challenges social workers face will not stop anytime soon.

Although, there are some associations such as Association of Medical Social Workers in Nigeria (AMSWON) which is an arm of the parent body Nigeria Association of Social Workers (NASOW) established in 1975 (Nigeria Association of Social Workers). The role of AMSWON is to protect and promote Medical Social Workers in health sector.

Convincingly, the austerity of COVID-19 is overwhelming as its effect on all aspects of life including health, economy, education, religion, and the general well-being of citizens is glaring (Onalu, Chukwu and Okoye, 2020). This therefore requires the services of Medical Professionals especially Medical Social Workers who are skilled in rendering counseling services in a time like this (IFSW, 2020). Despite the severity of COVID-19 pandemic and the important roles played by Medical Professionals in the health care centers in Nigeria. It is disheartening to note that Medical Social Workers who should be actively involved in health care in a time as this are been ignored and not effectively allowed to carry out their duties. Whose fault is this? Should we keep blaming it to the non-professionalization of Social Workers especially by our law makers or the fact there is no unified body to checkmates and ensures that Social Work as practiced in developed countries is the same here in Nigeria. The COVID-19 pandemic has opened the eyes of Medical Social Workers to see their important and need to actively carry out their duties as Medical Social Workers especially those in the hospital settings. Thus, the objectives of this study is to identify and examine the challenges face by Medical Social Workers especially in this COVID-19 era and also identify its implication for National Development.

METHODOLOGY: This study was carried out in June to September, 2020. The qualitative research design approach was adopted for the study. Utilizing indepth interviews (IDIS) to explore the views and perceptions on the challenges of Medical Social Workers in the selected hospitals (Federal Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital, (FNPH) Calabar and University of Calabar Teaching Hospital UCTH , Calabar) during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purposive sampling technique was utilized for data collection and in other to select the right participants (Medical Social Workers Practitioners) for the study. (Ritchie et al, 2014).

The tool for the data collection was in-dept semi-structured interview, with this tool the researcher was able to gain an in-dept information on the subject of research.

The study population was made up of Medical Social Work Practitioners who are staffs of the Federal Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital, Calabar and the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital, Calabar, Cross River State.

25 Semi-structured indepth interviews were conducted in the selected hospitals with the respondent in an agreed conducive atmosphere. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded with a functional recording devise and thereafter the data gotten was transcribed (Wiles, Crow, Heath and Charles,2008). The interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes each.

The participants were allowed to refuse any question and to withdraw from the study at anytime they wish to without any consequence (British society of Gerontology, 2012).

RESULTS: The socio-demographic results of the study revealed that there were more male Medical Social Workers between the ages of 30-45 years that dominated the study.

Data gotten from the interview were analyzed thematically after transcription, in English language, three themes were formulated from the objectives of study, the themes include: Challenges of Medical Social Workers during the onset of the COVID-19, Involvement of Medical Social Work Practitioners, and possible solutions and preventive measures to the challenges.

The themes are discussed below.

CHALLENGES OF MEDICAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS:

The participants expressed that they were as a matter of fact faced with several challenges and unmet needs before and at the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Responses from five participants are as follows.

“you can imagine me coming to the hospital without being supplied the necessary personal protective equipment such as face mask, hand sanitizers etc”. the management gave us some PPE, only during the first one week which was grossly inadequate. (36 years old: female {MSW, UCTH, Calabar}).

Also a 42 years old staff responded by saying

“it was a sad moment for me to be using my own money to purchase PPE when I could see other health workers being given the PPE, living my department without adequate supply of the PPE”. Infact my department was left out during the initial distributions of PPE which lasted for only one week. (42 years, female, MSW, FNPH, Calabar)”.

In addition to the lack of supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) to the Medical Social Workers on duty which pose as one of the challenges, furthermore, a 33 years old male Medical Social Worker said:

“The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a lock-down in the state and other parts of the country and this affected me greatly because I was unable to repatriate three of my patients who were to be repatriated to neighbouring states, infact no vehicles were allowed to move out or travel out to even close states as at when repatriation was approved. (33 years old, MALE, FNPH Calabar). also a 38 years old female MSWker said:

“The problems and challenges we experience this period were too many including lack of stationeries to work with, as my department had run short of office stationeries before even the onset of the pandemic, do the hospital management want me to continue to use my salary to be buying office stationeries like plain papers, casework report booklet etc?”

Come to think of it another challenge that calls for urgent attention is the need for an official vehicle to be attach to our office to enable us go out on social investigation and scheduled home visits to meet with our patient.

I also observed that my hospital is not one of the isolation centre and we were not adequately funded and provided with the needed PPE’s (38 years old: Female FNPH, Calabar).

A 42 years old medical social work practitioner said that:

One of the challenges of medical social work practitioners and the social work profession in general is the issue of lack of professionalization, we find persons employed here in our facility as social workers without any background training or qualification in social work and this brings about no respect for the profession of social work. (42 years old, Male, UCTH, Calabar).

INVOLVMENT OF MEDICAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS:

In this section the researcher intended to find out the level of involvement of Medical Social Work Practitioner in the fight against COVID-19 Pandemic. Thus responses from majority of the respondents from the selected hospitals indicates that there were only a few Medical Social Workers/ Practitioners who were actively involved from the onset of the pandemic.

Five responses were extracted and narrated as follows:

A Senior Social Worker reveal thus: “most of us including myself were not involved because the government asked civil servant Grade Level 11 and below to stay at home and that only officer from Grade level 12 and above were to report to work so as a Grade level 9 Officer, I stayed at home most of the time while my superior officers were reporting to duty (31 years old: Male, FNPH, Calabar)”.

A 42 years old, MSWker said: “I am an Assistant Chief Medical Social Worker and on Grade Level 12. I reported to duty daily and was involved in carrying out social work activities such as counseling some of the out-patients who came to the hospital for their routine checkup. I had about three counseling sessions with the patients respectively and counseled them on adhering to the WHO safety guidelines via Regular Hand washing avoiding crowded places, and the proper use of face mask and hand sanitizers”. (42 years old, Male UCTH, Calabar).

Another social worker explains further

“My hospital (UCTH Calabar) is one of the isolation centres, so I and some of my senior colleagues though few in number were on duty and had “one on one interactions with the COVID-19 patients and also met with some of the patients relatives who visited the hospital and benefited from counseling on the need to stay safe and were properly educated on early signs and symptoms of the COVID-19” and safely guidelines. (43 years old: Female, UCTH, Calabar).

Another stated:

“I was not involved in the care of COVID-19 patients in my centre but the little I could do to the patient I came in contact with was to ensure that I maintain social distance while interacting with them and reminding them to put on their face mask regularly and also encourage them to wash their hands regularly with soap” (40 years old: Male FNPH, Calabar)”.

A 36 years old, Medical Social worker said”

“In my unit were I was posted to as a social worker, we played no role at all. We just came to work reviewed some of our patients casework report booklet and at close of work I went home. I didn’t

have any direct contact in the management of COVID-19 patient". (36 years old, FNPH, Calabar)".

Possible solutions to the challenges of Medical Social Workers Practitioners: The participants gave some suggestions to possible solutions to the challenges. Responses from three participants are as follows:

"As a matter of urgency the Federal government should pass to Law the bill of the Act to establish the Council of Social Work in Nigeria, this I believe will go a long way in promoting Professionalization and effective regulation of social work practice in hospitals and in our country Nigeria as whole" (41 years old, MSW, Female, UCTH, Calabar).

Another stated:

"Hmmm we need to be provided with the needed PPE's throughout this COVID-19 pandemic in other to maintain the WHO safely guidelines, importantly, our hospital management should endeavour to sponsor medical social workers to attend workshops, seminar and conferences regularly so as to equip us intellectually on disaster management and contemporary trends in fighting COVID-19 pandemic and also in case of future pandemic". (40 Years old: MSW, Male UCTH, Calabar)".

A 38 years old Medical Social Worker said:

"Our hospital is long overdue to have a vehicle attached to the Medical Social Services Department because with the availability of an office vehicle we will be able to effectively and promptly go on social investigations timely and also carryout needed contact tracing which is an important aspects of our duties. We also need to be supplied regularly with adequate stationeries in other to carry out social work administration effectively in our department. (38 years old, Male, FNPH, Calabar)".

Discussion of Findings:

This study examined and identified the challenges of medical Social work practitioners in the selected hospitals before and in the COVID-19 Pandemic. The researchers are of the view that the challenges experienced by medical social workers definitely affected their inputs in the provision of needed social services to the services users. Our findings were related with other existing literatures to show our level of agreement or disagreement.

Findings from this study indicates that the major challenge of medical social work practice and social work as a unique profession is the lack of Professionalization of Social Work Practice in Nigeria.

This study agrees with the findings of Okoye, U. (2019). Okoye, (2019) asserts that the major challenge is the fact that social work in Nigeria has not been Professionalized by any act of parliament and so there is no obligation to employ social workers in every health facility in the country. (Okoye, U. 2019).

Indications show that in many parts of the world, countries like, Italy, China, United Kingdom, Sweden, Candana, Norway, USA and many others etc, Social Workers joined hands with other health and allied health practitioners in the current fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic. (Cui, 2020; Zhang et al; 2020).

however, in Nigeria findings suggest that they were significantly few medical social work practitioners who were actively involved especially in our Nigerian hospitals (e.g, UCTH Calabar).

On the issue of involvement of Medical Social Work Practitioners, the study reveals that, some of the participants stated that they were not directly involved and played no role because most of the social workers below Grade Level 11 were ask to stay at home while only those on Grade Level 12 and above were told to report to work.

Some of the participants stated that in their facility they were not provided with personal protective equipment (PPE) and as such had limited contacts with patients and also maintained social distance.

On this note, there is need for the government and the various hospital managements to ensure that medical social workers are adequately provided with the PPE's needed throughout this pandemic as well as the required

working tools such as office stationeries, official vehicles for social work investigations and to facilitate contact tracing whenever needs arises.

CONCLUSION:

It is our view that if the Federal Government Hospital Management implement the above possible solutions, the challenges of medical social work practitioners will be completely eliminated and consequently will facilitate ideal social work services in hospital settings and in the management and interventions for future pandemic.

STUDY INSTRUMENT (IN-DEPT INTERVIEW GUIDE)

Introduction, Exchange pleasantries, introduce yourself and ask the participant to also introduce themselves by their names, age and occupation or designation, supply participants with consent form, then proceed to the questions and probing.

1. What do you understand by challenges of medical social work practitioners? (Probe answers)
2. What are your views on the involvement of medical social workers/practitioners in the COVID-19 Pandemic? (probe to ascertain their level of involvement)
3. What are the possible solutions to the challenges? (probe to ascertain their level of involvement)

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