

Review

Medical social work in hospice settings: Bridging clinical care and emotional support

Tarvie Jacob Jack¹, Sylvester Chibueze Izah^{2,3,*}¹ Department of Medical Social Work, Faculty of Health Sciences, Bayelsa Medical University, Yenagoa 560221, Nigeria² Department of Community Medicine, Faculty of Clinical Sciences, Bayelsa Medical University, Yenagoa 560221, Nigeria³ Department of Microbiology, Faculty of Science, Bayelsa Medical University, Yenagoa 560221, Nigeria* **Corresponding author:** Sylvester Chibueze Izah, chivestizah@gmail.com

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Abstract: Medical social workers play an indispensable role in hospice settings by addressing the multifaceted needs of patients and their families during end-of-life care. This paper focuses on how their expertise in psychosocial assessment, care planning, advocacy, counseling, and resource coordination ensures holistic, patient-centered care that integrates clinical and emotional support. Medical social workers foster culturally sensitive practices through interdisciplinary collaboration, enhance communication among care teams, and provide tailored interventions that address emotional, social, and spiritual concerns. This integration improves the quality of life for patients and alleviates emotional and systemic burdens on healthcare infrastructures. In addition to their immediate contributions, medical social workers support sustainable healthcare systems by promoting health equity and addressing disparities in hospice care. Their work aligns with global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), by ensuring equitable access to compassionate care for marginalized populations. Furthermore, their efforts to empower communities, advocate for cost-effective care strategies, and integrate social and medical perspectives contribute to the long-term resilience of healthcare systems. As the healthcare landscape evolves, the role of medical social workers in hospice care becomes increasingly critical. Their ability to address root causes of distress, navigate complex family dynamics, and facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration exemplifies the necessity of their role in advancing equitable and effective end-of-life care.

Keywords: medical social work; hospice care; psychosocial assessment; health equity; sustainable healthcare; emotional support; holistic care

1. Introduction

Hospice care is fundamentally centered on providing comfort and dignity to terminally ill patients and their families. This approach is rooted in the philosophy that the end of life should focus on quality rather than quantity of life, emphasizing symptom management, emotional support, and spiritual care. Studies have shown that hospice enrollment not only enhances the quality of care but also leads to significant cost savings for healthcare systems, particularly Medicare, by reducing hospitalizations and improving patient satisfaction [1]. The holistic nature of hospice care integrates various aspects of patient well-being, ensuring that physical and emotional needs are addressed. This comprehensive approach is essential for creating a supportive environment where patients can experience a dignified end-of-life journey.

Medical social workers play a crucial role in the hospice care framework, providing essential psychosocial support that complements clinical interventions. Their expertise allows them to address the multifaceted needs of patients and families, including emotional, social, and spiritual concerns [2]. Research indicates that social workers are instrumental in conducting psychosocial assessments that inform care plans and ensure patients' needs are holistically met [3]. By integrating clinical care with emotional and psychosocial assistance, social workers help alleviate the burdens families face during this challenging time. Their involvement not only enhances the quality of life for patients but also supports family dynamics, fostering resilience and coping strategies that are vital during the grieving process.

The emotional and psychological dimensions of hospice care cannot be overstated. Social workers are trained to recognize and address the emotional turmoil that often accompanies terminal illness, providing counseling and support to both patients and their families [4]. This support is crucial as families navigate the complexities of end-of-life decisions and the emotional weight of impending loss. Furthermore, social workers facilitate communication among family members and healthcare providers, ensuring that everyone is aligned in their understanding of the patient's wishes and care goals. This collaborative approach improves the quality of care and enhances the overall experience for families, as they feel more informed and supported throughout the process.

Navigating the healthcare system can be particularly daunting for families facing terminal illnesses, and social workers serve as vital navigators in this complex landscape. They assist families in understanding their options, accessing resources, and advocating for their loved ones' needs within the healthcare system [5]. This advocacy is especially important in hospice care, where families may encounter barriers related to insurance coverage, service availability, and communication with healthcare providers. By addressing these systemic challenges, social workers help ensure that patients receive the care they deserve, ultimately improving outcomes and satisfaction levels for patients and their families.

The interdisciplinary nature of hospice care is another critical aspect of its effectiveness. Social workers collaborate with diverse healthcare professionals, including physicians, nurses, and chaplains, to create comprehensive care plans tailored to each patient's unique needs [6]. This team-based approach allows for a more thorough assessment of the patient's condition, involving medical needs and emotional and spiritual dimensions. Research has shown that effective communication and collaboration among team members lead to better patient outcomes and higher family satisfaction rates [7]. The integration of social work into the hospice team enhances the overall quality of care and ensures that all aspects of the patient's experience are considered.

Despite the many benefits of hospice care, challenges persist in the delivery of these services. Issues such as burnout among healthcare providers, including social workers, can impact the quality of care provided [8]. High levels of emotional strain and the demands of working with terminally ill patients can lead to decreased job satisfaction and effectiveness. Addressing these challenges is essential to maintaining a robust hospice workforce capable of delivering high-quality care. Organizations

must prioritize the well-being of their staff through support systems, training, and resources that enable them to cope with the emotional demands of their roles.

The impact of medical social workers in hospice care extends beyond individual patient interactions; it also contributes to the sustainability of healthcare systems as a whole. By improving the quality of end-of-life care, social workers help to reduce unnecessary hospitalizations and emergency room visits, which can strain healthcare resources [9]. Furthermore, their role in facilitating advance care planning and discussions about end-of-life preferences can lead to more appropriate care decisions, aligning treatment with patients' values and wishes. This alignment enhances patient satisfaction and promotes more efficient use of healthcare resources, ultimately benefiting the broader healthcare system.

Hospice care focuses on comfort, dignity, and quality of life for terminal patients. Research shows hospice enrollment reduces hospitalizations and cuts healthcare costs significantly. Medical social workers provide crucial emotional and psychosocial support for patients and families. They help navigate complex healthcare systems, advocating for necessary resources and care. The interdisciplinary team approach in hospice care improves patient outcomes and family satisfaction.

This paper explores the vital role of medical social workers in hospice settings, emphasizing their contributions to bridging clinical care and emotional support for patients and families. It highlights their multidisciplinary collaboration, ability to address psychosocial challenges and advocacy for equitable access to resources. Additionally, it examines how their work aligns with sustainable development goals, fostering long-term resilience in healthcare systems.

2. The role of medical social workers in hospice care

2.1. The essential role of medical social workers in hospice care

The role of medical social workers in hospice care is multifaceted and essential for providing holistic support to patients and their families during the end-of-life process. Medical social workers are trained professionals who engage in various activities that address patients' and their families' emotional, social, and financial needs. **Figure 1** presents the role of medical social workers in hospice care.



Figure 1. The role of medical social workers in hospice care.

2.1.1. Psychosocial assessments and care planning

One of the primary responsibilities of social workers in hospice care is conducting psychosocial assessments. These assessments are crucial for evaluating the emotional and social situations of patients and their families, which allows for the development of tailored care plans that address individual needs. Research indicates that patients and families value the comprehensive support provided by hospice services, including medical care and psychological and social assistance [10]. This holistic approach ensures that care plans are both medically sound and sensitive to the emotional and social dynamics at play during this challenging time [11].

In addition to psychosocial assessments, medical social workers play a vital role in care planning. They collaborate with interdisciplinary healthcare teams to develop comprehensive care strategies that address medical and emotional needs. Effective communication among team members is essential for ensuring that all aspects of a patient's care are considered [12]. However, studies have shown that there are often deficiencies in collaboration during care planning discussions, with social workers' contributions needing to be more utilized [13]. This lack of integration can lead to gaps in care that may negatively impact patient outcomes. Therefore, enhancing the role of social workers in interdisciplinary team meetings is crucial for improving the overall quality of hospice care [14].

2.1.2. Advocacy

Advocacy is another critical function of medical social workers in hospice settings. They advocate for patients and families, ensuring they have access to essential resources such as financial aid, community services, and legal support. This advocacy is essential for vulnerable populations facing additional healthcare barriers [15]. Social workers are trained to recognize these issues and work collaboratively with healthcare providers to address them, thereby improving health outcomes and the quality of the dying experience [16]. By facilitating communication between patients and the medical team, social workers help ensure that patients' needs and preferences are respected and met throughout the hospice process [17].

2.1.3. Counseling

Counseling is fundamental to the support that medical social workers provide to patients and families in hospice care. They offer emotional support to help individuals cope with grief, stress, and the complexities of end-of-life decisions. The emotional toll of terminal illness can be overwhelming, and social workers are equipped to provide the necessary support to navigate these challenges [18]. Research has shown that social workers play a significant role in addressing the psychological needs of patients and their families, which can lead to improved coping mechanisms and overall well-being [19]. This emotional support is vital in helping families cope with impending loss and facilitating discussions about end-of-life preferences and decisions.

2.1.4. Resource coordination

Resource coordination is another essential function of medical social workers in hospice care. They connect patients and families with community resources, such as support groups and home care services, to enhance the quality of life during the

hospice experience. This coordination is essential for ensuring patients receive comprehensive support beyond medical care [20]. Studies have highlighted the importance of social workers in facilitating access to these resources, which can significantly improve the overall hospice experience for patients and their families [21]. By linking families with appropriate community services, social workers help alleviate some of the burdens associated with caregiving and enhance the quality of life for patients and their caregivers.

2.2. Addressing challenges and enhancing the role of social workers in hospice care

The challenges faced by medical social workers in hospice care are significant and multifaceted. Issues such as limited information sharing in interdisciplinary team meetings, inadequate time during home visits, and a lack of clinical tools to assess caregivers' attitudes and competencies can hinder their effectiveness [12]. Moreover, the emotional demands of the role can lead to burnout and compassion fatigue among social workers, which can ultimately impact the quality of care provided to patients [20]. Addressing these challenges requires systemic changes within hospice organizations to ensure that social workers are adequately supported and integrated into the care team [17].

Training and education for social workers in hospice settings are also critical for enhancing their effectiveness. Research indicates that many social workers (may be) unprepared to address spiritual issues in end-of-life care, an essential component of holistic care [11]. Providing targeted training that focuses on the spiritual dimensions of care can empower social workers to better support patients and families in navigating these complex issues. Furthermore, ongoing professional development opportunities can help social workers stay informed about best practices and emerging trends in hospice care [22].

The integration of social work into hospice care is not only beneficial for patients and families but also for the healthcare system as a whole. Studies have shown that when supported by social work, hospice care leads to improved patient outcomes, including reduced symptom distress and enhanced quality of life [23]. Additionally, hospice care has been associated with lower healthcare costs and reduced reliance on hospital-based resources, underscoring the importance of comprehensive care models, including social work [24]. By advocating for the inclusion of social workers in hospice teams, healthcare organizations can enhance the overall effectiveness and efficiency of care delivery.

3. Interdisciplinary collaboration in hospice settings

Interdisciplinary collaboration in hospice settings is essential for delivering comprehensive, patient-centered care. Integrating diverse healthcare professionals, including physicians, nurses, chaplains, and therapists, creates a holistic approach to managing the complex needs of patients at the end of life. This collaborative model enhances the quality of care provided and fosters a supportive environment for patients and their families. Research indicates that when hospice aides are validated and integrated as interdisciplinary team members (IDT), the overall quality of patient and

family care improves significantly, alongside job satisfaction and retention among aides [25]. Including various professionals ensures that all aspects of a patient’s care—medical, emotional, and spiritual—are addressed, leading to better outcomes and a more dignified end-of-life experience. **Figure 2** presents the interdisciplinary collaboration in hospice settings.

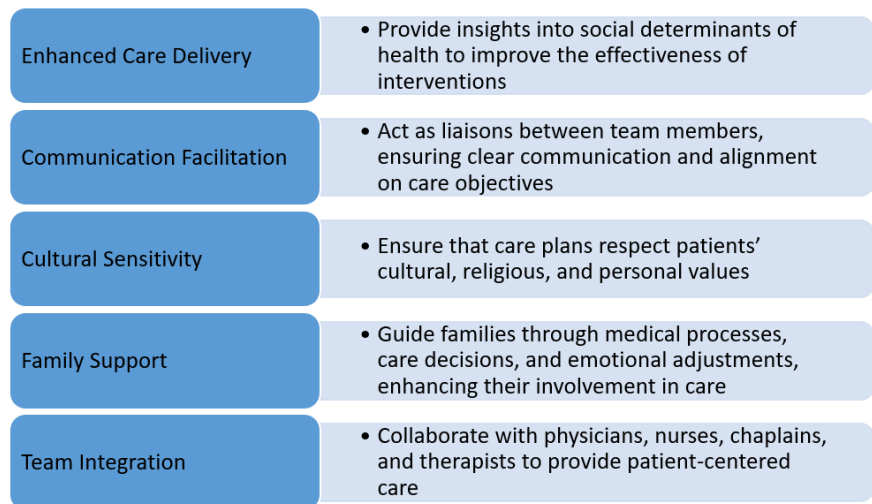


Figure 2. The interdisciplinary collaboration in hospice settings.

3.1. Cultural sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity is a critical component of effective hospice care, as it ensures that care plans respect and reflect patients’ cultural, religious, and personal values. The diverse backgrounds of patients necessitate a tailored approach that recognizes individual beliefs and practices. For instance, studies have shown that the emotional and spiritual needs of Hispanic families in hospice settings require particular attention and understanding [26]. By training healthcare professionals in culturally competent practices, hospices can better serve minority populations and address disparities in care [27]. Furthermore, integrating community health workers, such as *promotor as de salud*, has proven effective in enhancing health education and access to resources for underserved populations [26]. This culturally sensitive approach improves patient satisfaction and fosters trust and rapport between healthcare providers and families.

3.2. Effective communication

Effective communication is paramount in hospice settings, where the stakes are high, and decisions often involve complex emotional and ethical considerations. Acting as liaisons between team members, hospice social workers, and other professionals facilitates clear communication and alignment on care objectives. Research highlights that videoconferencing can enhance communication among family caregivers and hospice teams, improving emotional support and developing family-oriented care plans [28]. Additionally, hospice staff members have reported challenges related to communication, particularly regarding the roles of psychosocial and spiritual care providers, which often need to be understood or utilized [17]. Addressing these communication barriers is essential for ensuring that all team members are on the same page and that patients receive coordinated care.

3.3. Enhanced care delivery

Understanding social determinants of health significantly influences the delivery of enhanced care in hospice settings. These determinants, including socioeconomic status, education, and access to healthcare, play a crucial role in shaping health outcomes. Research suggests continuous support services, including in-home assistance for family caregivers, can mitigate socioeconomic disparities and reduce unplanned hospitalizations [29]. By providing insights into these determinants, hospice teams can tailor interventions to meet the specific needs of their patients, ultimately improving the effectiveness of care delivery. This approach aligns with the World Health Organization's definition of palliative care, which emphasizes the importance of addressing the broader context of a patient's life and medical needs [30].

3.4. Family support

Family support is another vital aspect of interdisciplinary collaboration in hospice care. Families often face significant emotional and logistical challenges as they navigate medical processes and care decisions for their loved ones. Hospice professionals are crucial in guiding families through these complexities, enhancing their involvement in care and decision-making [29]. Research indicates that family caregivers are integral to the care of hospice patients, providing essential support that can prevent crises and hospitalizations [29]. By equipping families with the necessary knowledge and resources, hospice teams can empower them to take an active role in their loved one's care, ultimately leading to better patient and family outcomes.

3.5. Team integration

The integration of diverse healthcare professionals in hospice settings also addresses the unique needs of specific populations, such as children and racial/ethnic minorities. Pediatric hospice care, for instance, requires specialized knowledge and approaches to meet the distinct needs of young patients and their families [31]. Studies have shown that telemedicine can enhance pediatric palliative care, allowing for better family communication and support [31]. Similarly, research highlights the importance of community outreach and collaboration with local organizations to improve access to hospice services for racial and ethnic minorities [27]. By recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by these populations, hospice teams can provide more equitable and effective care.

Moreover, the role of pharmacists within hospice interdisciplinary teams must be considered. Pharmacists contribute significantly to patient care by ensuring appropriate medication management, which is crucial in palliative settings where symptom control is a priority [30]. Their expertise in pharmacotherapy allows for more effective pain management and the alleviation of distressing symptoms, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for hospice patients. The integration of pharmacists into the IDT underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to care that includes all relevant healthcare professionals.

Despite the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration, challenges must be addressed when implementing effective team practices in hospice settings. Staff members often report feeling overwhelmed by regulatory constraints and the

complexities of coordinating care among various team members [17]. Additionally, the perception that specific roles, such as those of chaplains and social workers, are undervalued can hinder effective collaboration [17]. Addressing these challenges requires ongoing training, policy reforms, and a commitment to fostering a culture of teamwork and mutual respect among all hospice team members. Technology has also transformed the landscape of hospice care, facilitating better communication and collaboration among team members. Electronic health records (EHRs) allow for more efficient patient information sharing, enabling team members to stay informed about care plans and progress [32]. Furthermore, integrating telehealth services has expanded access to care, particularly for patients in remote areas or those with mobility challenges [33]. By leveraging technology, hospice teams can enhance their ability to provide timely and effective care, ultimately improving patient outcomes.

4. Challenges and enhancing support for medical social workers in hospice care

4.1. Challenges in hospice medical social work

The hospice medical social work field faces numerous challenges that significantly impact the quality of care provided to patients and their families (**Figure 3**).

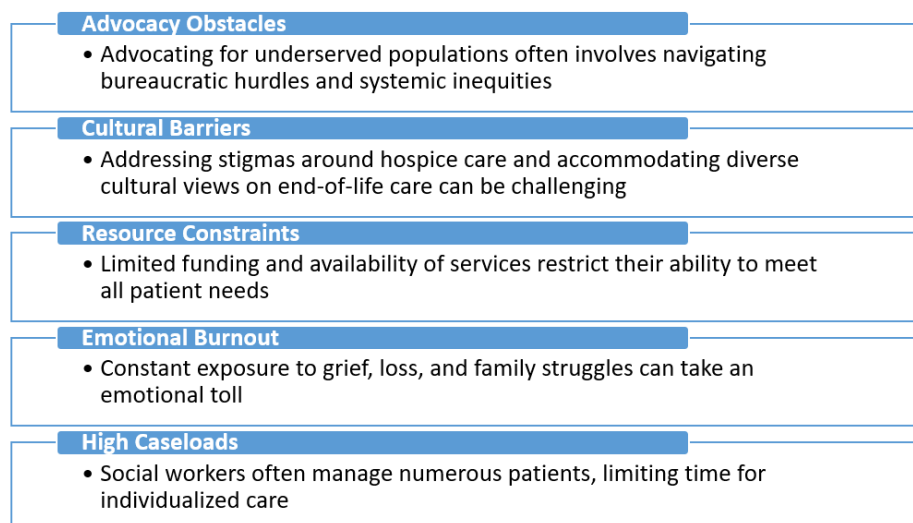


Figure 3. Challenges in hospice medical social work.

4.1.1. High caseload

One of the most pressing issues is the high caseloads that social workers must manage. Social workers in hospice settings often juggle numerous patients simultaneously, which restricts their ability to provide individualized care. This situation is exacerbated by financial pressures within the healthcare system, as highlighted by Cabin, who notes that the financial calculus in hospice care increasingly prioritizes profit over patient care, compromising the quality of services offered to patients and their families [34]. The inability to dedicate sufficient time to each patient

can hinder the development of meaningful relationships, which is crucial in providing effective end-of-life care.

4.1.2 Emotional burnout

Emotional burnout is another significant challenge faced by hospice social workers. The nature of their work exposes them to constant grief, loss, and the emotional struggles of families dealing with terminal illnesses. Research indicates that the emotional toll of such exposure can lead to burnout, negatively affecting the workers' mental health and ability to perform their duties effectively [18]. The cumulative effect of witnessing death and supporting grieving families can create a cycle of emotional fatigue that is difficult to break. This phenomenon is further compounded by the high demands placed on social workers, including the need to support distraught family members while managing their grief [18]. The emotional burden can lead to decreased job satisfaction and increased turnover rates among social workers in hospice settings.

4.1.3. Resource constraints

Resource constraints are a critical barrier to practical hospice social work. Limited funding and the availability of services restrict social workers' ability to meet all patient needs adequately. Teno's research highlights how financial considerations often overshadow patient care, resulting in inadequate support for patients and their families [34]. The lack of resources can manifest in various ways, including insufficient staffing, limited access to necessary services, and inadequate training opportunities for social workers. These constraints can ultimately compromise the quality of patient care, as social workers need more support to navigate the complexities of end-of-life care.

4.1.4. Cultural barriers

Cultural barriers also pose significant challenges in hospice medical social work. Addressing stigmas surrounding hospice care and accommodating diverse cultural views on end-of-life care can be difficult. Yapp [35] emphasized that cultural perceptions can influence family reluctance to accept hospice referrals, often leading to late referrals that negatively impact the quality of care received. Additionally, the need for culturally competent care is paramount, as social workers must navigate various cultural beliefs and practices related to death and dying. This complexity is further complicated by language barriers and differing family dynamics, which can hinder effective communication and understanding between social workers and patients or their families [36].

4.1.5. Advocacy

Advocacy for underserved populations is another area fraught with challenges. Social workers often find themselves advocating for patients who belong to marginalized communities, which requires navigating bureaucratic hurdles and systemic inequities. The work of Gardner et al. [37] underscored the racial and ethnic disparities in palliative care, highlighting the need for social workers to advocate for equitable access to services. However, the bureaucratic nature of healthcare systems can create obstacles that hinder effective advocacy, making it difficult for social workers to secure the necessary resources and support for their patients. This situation

is further complicated by the intersection of various social determinants of health, which can exacerbate existing disparities in access to care.

4.2. Strategies to support and enhance the effectiveness of medical social workers in hospice care

Several solutions have been proposed (**Figure 4**). Organizational support through counseling and resilience training can help social workers cope with the emotional demands of their work. Providing access to mental health resources and promoting a culture of self-care within hospice organizations can mitigate the effects of burnout and improve job satisfaction among social workers [18]. Furthermore, policies promoting manageable workloads and work-life balance are essential in ensuring social workers can provide high-quality care without compromising their well-being. Implementing strategies that allow for flexible scheduling and adequate patient interaction time can enhance hospice social work's overall effectiveness.



Figure 4. Solutions to the challenges in hospice medical social work.

Increased funding and community partnerships are also crucial for expanding resources available to hospice social workers. Collaborating with community organizations can help bridge service gaps and provide additional support for patients and their families. For instance, partnerships with harm reduction programs can improve access to end-of-life care for marginalized populations, such as those experiencing homelessness or substance use disorders [38]. By fostering these collaborations, hospice social workers can enhance the continuum of care and ensure that patients receive comprehensive support throughout their end-of-life journey.

Cultural competence training is vital for social workers to navigate the diverse cultural landscapes of their patients effectively. Education on cultural beliefs and practices related to death and dying can empower social workers to deliver more personalized and respectful care [39]. Creating an inclusive environment that values diverse perspectives also helps address the cultural barriers that often hinder effective communication and understanding in hospice settings. As noted by Milberg et al., understanding cross-cultural interactions is essential for improving the quality of end-of-life care [40]. By equipping social workers with the necessary skills and knowledge,

healthcare organizations can foster a more culturally sensitive approach to hospice care.

5. Emotional and ethical dimensions of hospice care

The emotional and ethical dimensions of hospice care represent a complex interplay of patient autonomy, family dynamics, and healthcare ethics (Figure 5).

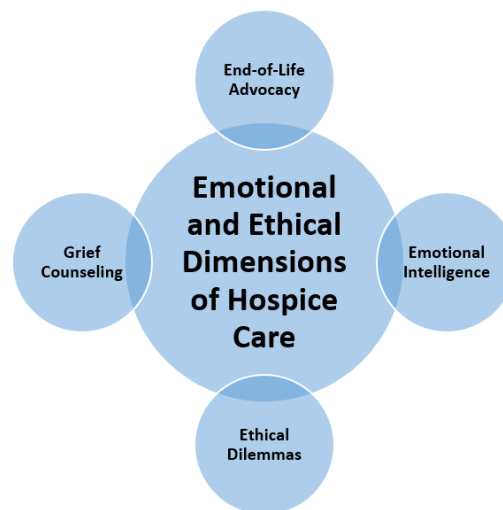


Figure 5. Emotional and ethical dimensions of hospice care.

5.1. Ethical dilemma

The ethical dilemma of balancing patient autonomy with medical recommendations and family preferences is a significant concern in hospice care. Patients in this setting often confront critical decisions regarding their treatment options, which are deeply influenced by their values and beliefs. Confidentiality and voluntariness cannot be overstated in this context, as they are fundamental to respecting patient autonomy. Research indicates that effective communication among healthcare providers, patients, and families is crucial in navigating these dilemmas, fostering understanding and respect for the patient's wishes while addressing family concerns [7,41–43]. The ethical principle of informed consent is predicated on the notions of autonomy, voluntariness, and the absence of coercion, which are essential for patients to make decisions that align with their values [44,45]. In hospice care, where decisions often involve end-of-life considerations, ensuring patients feel free to express their preferences without undue influence from family members or medical staff is vital for ethical practice [46]. This dynamic underscores healthcare professionals' need to cultivate an environment where patients feel secure in their choices, thereby enhancing the quality of care and patient satisfaction [47].

Moreover, the ethical dimensions of hospice care extend to issues of access and equity, particularly for marginalized populations such as undocumented immigrants, who may face significant barriers to accessing hospice services. These barriers can exacerbate suffering and complicate end-of-life care, highlighting the need for healthcare systems to address disparities and ensure equitable access to quality hospice care for all patients, regardless of their background [48,49]. Advocacy efforts to

improve access to hospice services for these populations are essential in upholding the ethical principles of justice and equity in healthcare [50]. The interplay between patient autonomy, confidentiality, and the moral obligation to provide equitable care illustrates the complexity of decision-making in hospice settings. By prioritizing these ethical considerations, healthcare providers can better support patients and their families during one of the most challenging times, ultimately fostering a more compassionate and just healthcare system [51].

5.2. Emotional support and intelligence

The emotional support provided to patients and their families is paramount in hospice settings. Studies have shown that emotional support correlates positively with satisfaction in hospice care, emphasizing the need for healthcare providers to be attuned to the emotional states of their patients and families [41,52]. The provision of anticipatory grief counseling is essential in helping families manage their emotions as they prepare for the impending loss of a loved one. This support can significantly alleviate the psychological burden associated with the dying process, allowing families to engage in meaningful conversations and farewells [41,53]. Moreover, post-loss bereavement support is equally important, as it aids families in navigating their grief and adjusting to life after loss, which can be a prolonged and challenging journey [53].

Emotional intelligence plays a critical role in hospice care, particularly in the context of empathy and active listening. Healthcare providers must cultivate these skills to effectively address the concerns of patients and their families [54]. Empathy in hospice care is not merely a professional obligation but an essential component of the therapeutic relationship that fosters trust and openness [54]. By actively listening to patients and families, providers can better understand their needs and preferences, vital for delivering patient-centered care. This approach not only enhances the quality of care but also contributes to the emotional well-being of both patients and their families [54].

5.3. End-of-life advocacy

End-of-life advocacy is another crucial aspect of hospice care, as it empowers patients to make informed decisions regarding their treatment options, including advance directives and palliative care choices. Research indicates that patients well-informed about their options are more likely to discuss their care preferences, leading to better alignment between their wishes and the care they receive [55]. This advocacy is critical in diverse populations where cultural and religious beliefs may influence end-of-life decisions [56]. Healthcare providers must be equipped to navigate these complexities and ensure patients' voices are heard and respected throughout the decision-making process [55].

5.4. Conflict mediation

Conflict mediation is often necessary in hospice care settings, mainly when family disagreements arise regarding care approaches. These conflicts can stem from differing opinions about treatment options, the appropriateness of hospice care, or the patient's wishes [57]. Effective conflict resolution strategies are essential to ensure

that care remains patient-centered and the patient's autonomy is upheld. Research highlights the importance of facilitating open communication among family members and healthcare providers to address misunderstandings and foster collaborative decision-making [57]. By mediating conflicts, healthcare providers can help families reach a consensus and honor patients' preferences.

The role of healthcare providers in hospice care extends beyond clinical responsibilities; they must also act as emotional support systems for patients and families. This dual role requires providers to be sensitive to the emotional and psychological needs of those they care for [41,52]. Studies have shown that families who receive adequate emotional support during the hospice process report higher satisfaction levels with the care provided [7,41]. This underscores the importance of training healthcare professionals in emotional intelligence and communication skills, enabling them to provide holistic care that addresses the dying process's physical and emotional aspects [41,52].

Moreover, the integration of grief counseling into hospice care is essential for supporting families through the anticipatory grief process. Anticipatory grief can manifest as a range of emotions, including sadness, anger, and anxiety, as families prepare for the loss of a loved one [41,53]. Providing families with tools and resources to cope with these emotions can significantly enhance their overall experience in hospice care. Research suggests that families who engage in grief counseling are better equipped to manage their feelings and navigate the complexities of loss, ultimately leading to healthier grieving processes [41,53].

6. Implications for sustainable development

The implications for sustainable development, particularly in health equity and access to quality hospice care, are multifaceted and critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (**Table 1**). One of the primary objectives is to ensure that vulnerable populations, including marginalized groups, have equitable access to quality hospice care. This is particularly relevant to SDG 3, which emphasizes good health and well-being, and SDG 10, which focuses on reducing inequalities. Research indicates that social support systems significantly enhance healthcare accessibility, especially for older adults who often face geographic and economic barriers to care [58]. By fostering community-based support systems, we can mitigate these barriers, thereby promoting health equity and improving overall well-being.

Table 1. Implications of medical social work in hospice care for sustainable development.

Aspect	Key Focus	Impact
Health Equity	Ensuring vulnerable populations have equitable access to quality hospice care.	Improves fairness in healthcare delivery and addresses disparities for underserved communities.
Contributions to SDGs	SDG 3: Promotes physical and mental well-being through holistic care. SDG 10: Addresses inequalities in end-of-life care for marginalized groups.	Aligns hospice practices with global goals for health and reduced inequalities.
Community Empowerment	Strengthening community-based support systems to reduce reliance on formal healthcare infrastructures.	Encourages localized care solutions and builds resilience within communities.

Table 1. (Continued).

Aspect	Key Focus	Impact
Cost-Effectiveness	Advocating for preventive and palliative measures to reduce costs associated with prolonged hospital stays.	Eases the financial burden on patients, families, and healthcare systems.
Sustainable Models	Fostering practices that integrate social support with medical care to ensure long-term resilience.	Enhances the durability and effectiveness of healthcare systems to meet future demands.

Moreover, integrating social accountability values into medical education is essential for preparing future healthcare professionals to address diverse populations' needs effectively. Educating medical students about the healthcare system's structure and the importance of preventive care can lead to better health outcomes and resource utilization [59]. This educational approach aligns with the principles of holistic care, which is vital for promoting physical and mental well-being as outlined in SDG 3. By equipping healthcare providers with the necessary knowledge and skills, we can ensure that they are better prepared to serve vulnerable populations, thereby enhancing health equity.

Community empowerment is another critical aspect of sustainable development in healthcare. Strengthening community-based support systems can significantly reduce dependency on formal healthcare infrastructures, which is particularly important in underserved areas. Studies have shown that mobile health clinics can effectively deliver care to impoverished populations, demonstrating the potential of community-driven healthcare initiatives [60]. These initiatives provide essential services and foster a sense of community ownership and involvement in health promotion, which is crucial for sustainable development. Cost-effectiveness is a vital consideration in the context of healthcare sustainability. Advocating for preventive and palliative measures can significantly reduce healthcare costs associated with prolonged hospital stays. Research has demonstrated that meal delivery programs can reduce healthcare utilization among dually eligible Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries, highlighting the importance of integrating social services with healthcare [61]. Focusing on preventive care and community support can alleviate the financial burden on healthcare systems while improving patient outcomes.

The development of sustainable care models that integrate social support with medical services is essential for ensuring long-term resilience in healthcare systems. Integrated care models have improved access and quality of services, particularly for individuals with complex health needs [62]. By fostering collaboration among healthcare providers, social workers, and community organizations, we can create a more cohesive and effective healthcare delivery system that addresses the diverse needs of patients.

Technology, such as telemedicine, has also shown promise in improving access to hospice and palliative care, particularly for pediatric patients [31]. By leveraging technology to enhance care delivery, we can reach underserved populations more effectively, promoting health equity and improving the quality of care. This approach aligns with sustainable development goals, as it seeks to reduce inequalities in healthcare access. Moreover, community initiatives in healthcare must be considered. Research has shown that family and social support systems significantly influence healthcare access and utilization, particularly among immigrant populations [63]. By

fostering these community ties and support networks, we can enhance healthcare accessibility and promote health equity, essential for sustainable development.

Furthermore, addressing disparities in end-of-life care for marginalized groups is crucial for achieving SDG 10. Research indicates that access to hospice care varies significantly across different populations and is often influenced by socioeconomic factors and systemic barriers [64]. By identifying and addressing these disparities, we can work towards a more equitable healthcare system that ensures all individuals receive the care they need at the end of life. In addition, the role of social workers in integrated healthcare teams is increasingly recognized as vital for addressing the socio-emotional needs of patients, particularly older adults with multiple comorbidities [3,65]. By incorporating social workers into healthcare teams, we can enhance the holistic approach to patient care, ensuring that both medical and social determinants of health are addressed. This integration is essential for promoting health equity and improving overall health outcomes.

Furthermore, integrating social work into sustainable healthcare systems is pivotal for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3, which promotes physical and mental well-being through holistic care, and SDG 10, which addresses healthcare access for marginalized groups. Social workers play a crucial role in bridging gaps in healthcare delivery, advocating for vulnerable populations, and ensuring that healthcare systems are equitable and sustainable. Examples of these are discussed in the subheadings below.

6.1. Nordic countries' sustainable healthcare models

Nordic countries, notably Norway, have established a robust framework for sustainable healthcare that emphasizes environmental management and social equity. All hospitals in Norway are certified under the ISO 14001 environmental management system, which mandates continuous improvement in sustainability practices [66]. Social workers in these settings are integral to implementing holistic care approaches that address physical and mental health needs, thereby contributing to SDG 3. They facilitate access to services for marginalized populations, ensuring that care is culturally competent and sensitive to the unique challenges faced by these groups [66].

6.2. Integrated care models in the UK

In the UK, integrated care systems (ICS) have been developed to enhance collaboration among healthcare providers, including social services. This model aims to provide seamless care that addresses the social determinants of health, essential for promoting well-being [67]. Social workers within ICS play a vital role in coordinating care for individuals with complex needs, ensuring that mental health services are integrated with physical health care. This holistic approach is crucial for achieving SDG 3, as it recognizes the interconnectedness of physical and mental health [67]. Furthermore, social workers advocate for policies that reduce inequalities in healthcare access, particularly for marginalized communities, thus supporting SDG 10 [67].

6.3. Palliative care initiatives in Canada

In Canada, social workers are actively involved in palliative care initiatives that aim to provide equitable end-of-life care. These programs address patients' and their families' emotional, psychological, and social needs, essential for promoting dignity and quality of life during the final stages of life [68]. Research indicates that social workers help reduce disparities in access to palliative care services among marginalized groups, directly contributing to SDG 10 [68]. Their role in facilitating communication between patients, families, and healthcare providers ensures that care is tailored to individual needs, promoting a more humane approach to end-of-life care [68].

6.4. Community health programs in Australia

Australia's community health programs exemplify the integration of social work into sustainable healthcare systems. These programs focus on preventive care and health promotion, particularly in underserved communities [69]. Social workers in these settings engage in outreach efforts to educate individuals about health resources and services, enhancing access to care and promoting overall well-being [69]. By addressing social determinants of health, such as housing and employment, social workers contribute to the holistic care model envisioned in SDG 3. Additionally, their advocacy for policy changes that support marginalized populations aligns with the goals of SDG 10 [69].

6.5. Social work in mental health services in the United States

Social workers are essential in mental health services in the United States, particularly in community-based settings. They provide counseling and support to individuals facing mental health challenges, often exacerbated by socioeconomic factors [70]. Integrating social work into mental health care addresses immediate psychological needs and promotes long-term well-being by connecting individuals with resources that enhance their quality of life [70]. This approach aligns with SDG 3, as it emphasizes the importance of mental health as a component of overall health. Furthermore, social workers advocate for policies that address systemic inequalities in mental health care access, thus contributing to SDG 10 [70].

6.6. Health equity initiatives in South Africa

In South Africa, social workers are at the forefront of health equity initiatives to address the disparities in healthcare access among marginalized populations. These initiatives focus on providing culturally appropriate care and ensuring that healthcare services are accessible to all, regardless of socioeconomic status [71]. Social workers engage in community mobilization efforts to raise awareness about health rights and available services, empowering individuals to seek care [71]. This advocacy is crucial for achieving SDG 10, as it directly addresses inequalities in healthcare access. Moreover, by promoting holistic care that includes mental health support, social workers contribute to the objectives of SDG 3 [71].

6.7. Telehealth innovations in Rural Areas

The rise of telehealth has transformed healthcare delivery in rural areas, where access to services is often limited. Social workers are critical in facilitating telehealth services, ensuring that individuals in remote locations can access physical and mental health care [72]. By providing support and guidance in navigating telehealth platforms, social workers help reduce barriers to care, thereby promoting well-being and health equity [72]. This innovation aligns with SDG 3 by enhancing access to holistic care and supports SDG 10 by addressing inequalities faced by rural populations [72].

Finally, a comprehensive understanding of the social determinants of health is paramount. Addressing social needs, such as food security and housing stability, is increasingly recognized as a critical component of healthcare delivery [73]. By incorporating these social determinants into healthcare planning and policy, we can create a more equitable and sustainable healthcare system that meets the needs of all individuals, particularly those in vulnerable populations.

7. Limitations and future research

The role of medical social workers in hospice care is crucial, yet several limitations in the existing literature highlight significant gaps that warrant further investigation. One of the primary limitations is the insufficient exploration of social workers' contributions within diverse cultural contexts. While cultural competence is recognized as essential in healthcare, empirical studies assessing the effectiveness of social workers' interventions across various cultural groups remain limited. Research indicates that patients' cultural backgrounds can significantly influence their care preferences and outcomes, suggesting that social workers must adapt their approaches accordingly [10]. Furthermore, the long-term effects of social workers' involvement in family dynamics post-patient death are underexplored. Understanding how social workers' support during hospice care translates into sustained benefits for families after the loss could provide valuable insights into the holistic impact of hospice services [74]. Future research should prioritize these areas to enhance social work interventions' cultural relevance and effectiveness in hospice settings.

Another critical gap in the literature pertains to the emotional and physical demands placed on social workers themselves. While studies have documented the high levels of stress and burnout among hospice care workers, there is a lack of comprehensive research focusing on the structural and organizational factors that can mitigate these challenges. For instance, effective supervisory models and organizational support programs could be pivotal in reducing burnout and enhancing job satisfaction among social workers [75]. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, increasing workloads and emotional strain on hospice workers, highlighting the urgent need for research that identifies effective strategies for supporting these professionals [76]. Additionally, examining the efficacy of interdisciplinary team models in hospice care is essential. Research suggests that social workers often face challenges in fully integrating into care teams, which can impede their ability to contribute effectively to patient care [13]. Future studies should investigate how social workers' roles can be better recognized and integrated within interdisciplinary teams to improve patient and worker outcomes.

Finally, the literature lacks a thorough examination of the innovative approaches that could enhance the sustainability of medical social work in hospice settings. There is a pressing need for evidence-based strategies that improve patient outcomes and support social workers' well-being. For example, exploring the impact of mindfulness interventions on hospice workers' well-being could provide insights into effective coping mechanisms [77]. Moreover, understanding how healthcare systems globally recognize and integrate social work roles in hospice care can inform best practices and policy recommendations [78]. By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to a more robust understanding of the multifaceted role of social workers in hospice care, ultimately leading to improved care for patients and families during one of the most challenging times in their lives.

8. Conclusion

Medical social workers are indispensable in hospice care, addressing the complex intersection of clinical and emotional needs during end-of-life care. Their expertise in psychosocial assessment forms the backbone of patient-centered care, guiding interdisciplinary teams to develop culturally sensitive and tailored care plans. By navigating the social, emotional, and financial challenges patients and families face, these professionals provide holistic support that complements clinical interventions. This integration improves the quality of life for patients and alleviates the emotional and logistical burdens on families and the broader healthcare system. Their contributions align with global goals for equitable and sustainable healthcare, ensuring that vulnerable populations receive compassionate, dignified, and comprehensive care.

Furthermore, integrating social work into hospice care fosters sustainable healthcare practices by addressing root causes of distress and enhancing communication within interdisciplinary teams. Medical social workers ensure that care's psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions are not overlooked, creating a more inclusive and practical approach to end-of-life care. As healthcare systems evolve, the role of these professionals becomes increasingly vital for driving systemic change that promotes equitable access and quality care. Their work exemplifies the necessity of a multidisciplinary framework that meets the diverse needs of patients and families with empathy and effectiveness. Strengthening support for hospice social workers through training, resource allocation, and organizational collaboration will ensure the evolution of compassionate, patient-centered end-of-life care.

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