



## Role of Oncology Social Worker's in India

### KEYWORDS

Cancer, Oncology, Social Work, Therapy

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**ABSTRACT** Worldwide the incidence and prevalence of cancer is increasing day by day and this also followed in India. Cancer care is basically a team work with the involvement of oncologists, pathologists, psychologists, social workers, oncology nurses, pharmacists, etc. Since last few decades, social work profession has emerged as one of the most demanding profession in India. Social work profession is continuously working towards several supportive services in the field of oncology. Major roles include patient's social and economic assessment, comprehensive patient and family counseling, economic support measures and post treatment follow up and social rehabilitation. Social workers are professionally trained persons having adequate knowledge on several therapies like, cognitive behavior therapy, dignity therapy, group therapy, meaning-centered therapy, family therapy, supportive therapy, psycho-therapy etc. Oncology team work will be more functional with the existence of professional social workers. So, it provides importance to include professional social workers in the context of Indian oncology for betterment of the patients and as well as other stakeholders

### Introduction:

Cancer is a life-threatening disease, and receiving a cancer diagnosis is an extremely stressful experience <sup>[1]</sup>. Cancer is a leading cause of death worldwide and accounted for 8.2 million deaths in 2012 <sup>[2]</sup>. So, cancer care is very important from the view point of oncology. Cancer care is basically a team work and the team should have oncologist (surgical, radiation, medical), physicists, technologists, technicians, oncology nurses, pathologists, radiologists, epidemiologists, psychologists, social workers, palliative care experts, pharmacists, etc. Cancer treatment is also multi-modular and multidimensional.

Social Work is a professional service which can deliver its support to the needy people. Social workers in hospital setting are viewed seriously because of their active and professional service towards patients and their caregivers. Ida Canon became the first hospital social worker at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston in the year 1919 and from then medical social work got its root. Since then the hospital patients were viewed not only for medical purposes but also patients were seen in the perspective of biopsychosocial aspects <sup>[3]</sup>.

### Methodology:

Secondary data collection method was followed for this review study. The authors searched articles and reports from several journals which were published in PubMed, Google Scholar, CrossRef, Google, etc. The authors accepted both published and unpublished works. Out of 32 searched publications, a total 14 articles were included for this review. The search engine consists of both research works and review works.

### Results:

Social work profession in India: Social workers attempt to relieve and prevent hardship and suffering. They have a responsibility to help individuals, families, groups and communities through the provision and operation of appropriate services and by contributing to social planning. They work with, on behalf of, or in the interests of peo-

ple to enable them to deal with personal and social difficulties and obtain essential resources and services. Their work may include, but is not limited to, interpersonal practice, group work, community work, social development, social action, policy development, research, social work education and supervisory and managerial functions in these fields. The field of practice for professional Social Worker is expanding day by day <sup>[4]</sup>. Since last few decades 'Social Work' profession has emerged as one of the most demanding profession in India. Social workers are now working in various positions in various organizations in India. Now-a-days social workers are engaged in the field of health. In health-care system, social workers are actively participating from the initial patient's registration to active follow up.

Responsibilities of professional social workers in cancer setting in India: Social workers occupied their position in several Indian Cancer Hospitals with the application of their professional skill, knowledge, tools, methodologies, and techniques. Some hospitals also mentioned the importance of social work. Social work department is rapidly evolving as the backbone for supportive services extended to cancer patients visiting the oncology center. It aims to ameliorate the psychosocial and economic burdens of patients by adopting a holistic approach. Realizing that cancer as a disease places enormous physical, psychological, and economic burden on the patient as well as relatives, the social work department has integrated itself into the total treatment protocol from the first day of patient's visit to the Oncology Center. The key components of social work include social and economic assessment, comprehensive patient and family counseling, economic support measures and post treatment follow up and social rehabilitation. <sup>[5]</sup>. Social workers are involved in several activities in oncology setting (Table 1). In India, most of the oncology social workers are following such type of activities towards preventive oncology. Besides these, oncology social workers are also playing vital role in oncology research activities.

**Table 1: Oncology social workers activity**

PATIENT	FAMILY	COMMUNITY
Registration	Counseling	Community organization
Data collection	Tobacco cessation	Awareness
Counseling	Group work	Screening camps
Case work	Motivation	Street play/drama
Tobacco cessation	Using therapies	Tobacco cessation
Admission/discharge	Awareness	
Motivation	Economic assessment	
Economic assessment	Support system	
Support system	Grief	
Grief	Family adjustment	
Follow up	Bereavement	
Referrals		
Using therapies		
Rehabilitation		

Professional social workers in health care using various therapies: The year 1918 marked a juncture in the development of social work in health care. During that year, the fledgling group of hospital social workers responded to needs created by World War I, the influenza pandemic, and epidemics of tuberculosis and venereal disease. At the same time, in order to meet these needs and to professionalize their services, they formed a professional organization, published two new journals, and expanded opportunities for professional education [6]. So, Social Work is related to health care since 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Professional social workers are using several therapies to deal with cancer patients and other terminally ill patients. These therapies are mentioned below –

**Cognitive Behavior Therapy:** Professional social workers are frequently using this therapy while dealing with cancer or other terminally ill patients. (Hooymann and Kramer, 2006), mentioned that cognitive behavior therapy may be beneficial for patients who are focusing more on negative thoughts and feelings about themselves or others [7]. (Nichols, 2010) mentioned that, cognitive behavior therapy is an outcome of positive or negative behavior that can be created by a chosen reinforcement behavior. This can be used to increase positive behavior [8].

**Dignity Therapy:** Social workers are professionally trained persons and professional ethics always allow them to treat individual with their dignity. (Chochinov et al., 2011) mentioned in dignity therapy that, the patient reviews his or her life with assistance from a therapist who asks questions based on the empirical model of dignity. Questions on significant events, roles, and accomplishments are asked in order to assist the patient in finding purpose, meaning, pride, and hope in his or her life. Difficult issues, such as the post-death burden to families can be discussed in order to help the patient prepare the family for the difficulty ahead [9].

**Group Therapy:** Group therapy has been found to be therapeutic and effective for complicated grief work, such as for those who may develop depression due to grief or who may have suicidal thoughts [10]. Actually group therapy is enhancing the patient's sense of belongingness, tries to improve their coping mechanisms, and develops social relationships. Most importantly it granted the problem solving of patients with the help of others.

**Meaning-Centered Therapy:** Social workers are also using meaning-centered therapy and this therapy is a holistic method focused on the mind/body/soul approach. As per this therapy, meaning is both individually and socially constructed. One research expressed that "Suffering without meaning will lead to despair and depression" [11]. Meaning-Centered Therapy is a positive therapy and deals with person's hopefulness.

The social workers are also using family therapy, supportive therapy, psycho-therapy, behavioral approach etc., for the betterment of patients care in the field of oncology.

#### Discussion:

Social workers are actively working in oncology centers from patient's initial registration to rehabilitation. Social workers have adequate knowledge on problem solving approach and able to handle psycho-pathological conditions.

Throughout the history, social work has played a critical role in major client/patient care initiatives because of its unique perspective, wisdom, and skills. Social work profession is again challenged to work across disciplines and change systems of care to improve the health and welfare of patients with cancer and their families. Indeed, emerging research suggests that the use of psychosocial screening instruments results in reductions in emotional distress, better quality of life, and improved patient-provider communication [12]. Fundamental task of social work in cancer setting is to facilitate patients and families coping with cancer diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, and follow up. Social workers can play an active role of patient's demographic follow up. Demographic follow up involves phone calls, posting of letters, using patient's email, sending messages, and conducting home visits [13]. Now-a-days, Medical Social Workers (MSW) are providing psychosocial services to the cancer patients because they have knowledge in regards to disease, treatment, psycho-social and other pathological conditions [14].

#### Conclusion:

Social workers are the key factors in preventive oncology. The role of social worker is important not only for the patients, families, and communities but also for the oncologists, and other oncology team members. Cancer care is a team approach and that team will be more functional with the existence of professional social workers. So, it provides importance to include professional social workers in the context of Indian oncology for betterment of the patients and as well as other stakeholders.

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