Addressing New Paradigms: Social Work Professional Identity and Interprofessional Teams

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Overview

Social workers in the United States have long struggled for recognition of legitimacy in the healthcare field. The authors present a project to train social work students for full participation and leadership in healthcare teams as the paradigm shifts to emphasize biopsychosocial and team models of practice.

Learning Objectives

• Participants will understand the critical role of social work professionals in interprofessional healthcare teams.
• Participants will critically analyze the historical foundation for the hierarchical structure in healthcare teams in the U.S., and its effect on modern social work professional roles.
• Participants will identify strategies in social work education for the development of competence in leadership and transactional skills necessary for practice in interprofessional healthcare teams.

Background

Healthcare is a system that involves many disciplines, but since its inception, the American Medical Association has endeavored to limit the authority of nonphysician healthcare providers, including social workers. In 1910, Abraham Flexner released a report highlighting the importance of biomedical approaches to healthcare to the exclusion of all others. Flexner’s report was particularly damaging to social work, which he derided as less than a profession, with a questionable role in the healthcare field. Flexner’s report had the effect of strengthening biomedical models, reducing access to medical education, restricting access to healthcare, and limiting the scope of healthcare practice.

Healthcare for the 21st Century

While the AMA has loosened its stance on the legitimacy of nonphysician healthcare providers, it continues to insist on Physician-Led Team Based Care. Under this model, physicians are promoted as the qualified leader of healthcare teams. This is particularly challenging for social work professionals, who have struggled with professional identity since the inception of the profession. Much of this arises from Flexner’s central critique: a lack of a body of knowledge that defined social work and a lack of specificity in the objectives of social work education. However, the role of social work in interdisciplinary healthcare settings is important because social workers are best positioned to address the social and environmental aspects of the patient’s health. This issue of how social work fits into the history of ideas about the social world, social problems, and professional practice must be addressed in modern training programs.

Social Work Leadership in Interprofessional Teams

• Interprofessional training opportunities at U of M MSW program
• Midsouth Social Work Professional Development Initiative
• Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)
• Social work integration with primary care
• Health as “holistic well-being” rather than simply the absence of disease

References


