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The Role of Social Workers in Health System during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Social workers in health institutions in Republic of North Macedonia are included by giving of social protection services to individuals - patients hospitalized in health institutions or come for hospital treatments. They are part of multi-disciplinary teams, their role is seen upon their professional work in the area of prevention, giving of social interventions and social services to patients and their families, interventions in times of crisis, social support and enabling of patients for good social. Social workers as health coworkers were also struck during the pandemic in their area of expert work as a result of worsened epidemiologic state in the country, the measures and recommendations for protection from Covid -19. The empirical research was done in August 2021 year, with the participants of 33 social workers working in secondary and tertiary health protection. The goal of this research is to gain information on the situation of social workers working in the health system, during the Covid -19 pandemic. A part of the research was to acknowledge the consequences of the Covid 19 pandemic's influence on the expert work of social workers in our health system. Methods and techniques of the research: A quantitative method was used in the research, and a survey questionnaire was used to study the condition and professional work of social workers in the system. The obtained results have shown that 51.55 of the surveyed individuals face problems to realize their everyday work obligations. A total of 60.6% of the participants have problems in their cooperation with institutions, citizen associations and humanitarian organizations. As for the professional help and support given by social workers, a total of 25 participants or 75.8% percent have problem in giving this kind of social service to patients and their families.

Keywords: social workers, health system, patients, Covid -19, social services

Social Work in the Health System

Apart from social protection, it is a visible area in where social work is applied. In the world literature, we come across the terms: medical social work and psychiatric social work. American doctor Cabot is considered to be the founder of social work in health, who in 1893 year employs the first known social worker in the hospital in Boston. The essence of social work in healthcare consists of mediation between the doctor and the patient with his external environment. The social worker on the one hand helps the doctor to view the patient as a social person, and on the other hand, helps the patient to function as successfully as possible during the illness, but also after it in his family, work and local environment. (Donevska, 2014).

Modern trends in the approach to disease and health are increasingly holistic, which in addition to the medical segment, impose social factors as key predictors of people's quality of life. The social-health connection has been noticed for a long time, but it is still not sufficiently recognized and understood, because of that today there is a deficit of social workers in the field of health. Social workers today work in hospitals, health centers, mental health centers, social health care institutions, where the needs of users are different, which requires good professional competencies (Sharic, N, Dudic, A. Shadic A. 2018). Social workers in health in our country are most often represented in the secondary and tertiary health care as professional associates. They provide social protection services in the form of social work with patients who are hospitalized or call for outpatient treatment.

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They are part of multidisciplinary teams, their role is seen through their professional work in providing social interventions, crisis interventions, social rehabilitation and training of patients for their functioning in everyday life, as well as in many other forms of assistance and support, which facilitate their return to the environment. Social workers as a professional profile are involved in the prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of certain health diseases, while paying attention to family, environmental, cultural and other factors that may be the cause of occurrence and development of diseases in patients.

From the experience so far, it can be noticed that social workers perform various activities, depending on the category of patients they work with and depending on the health institution where they are employed. The most common activities they perform in their professional work are: Collecting and evaluating data about the patient and his family, the immediate and wider social environment in order to prepare the social history. Based on the data contained in the social history and the previous assessment of the patient, the social worker prepares an individual plan for working with the patient where the patient's needs are determined, the goals that are expected to be achieved, the interventions he undertakes to achieve the goals, the time frame for their realization, in full agreement with the patient (Ilievski, 2013). The treatment of providing different shapes of social interventions and social services help patients to better understand and solve the arisen problems.

Regarding their professional work, social workers mostly work in the area of:

- Participates in the admission of the patient in the health institution;
- Participates in teamwork in the treatment of patients as a health associate;
- Performs psycho-social assessment of patients in terms of identifying their risks and needs;
- Prepares a social history for each patient who is hospitalized in the health institution;
- Prepares an individual treatment plan with the patient / patients;
- Keeps documentation for the patient related to the social services received by the patient / patients;
- Informs the team about the undertaken social activities for the patients and their families;
- Conducts individual and group work with patients;
- Provides professional assistance and support to patients and their families;
- Provides individual and group advisory work;
- Education about the disease of patients and families together with the team (causes, development, treatment, prognosis);
- Providing psycho-social support to patients and their families;
- Monitoring the course of treatment of patients;
- Development of a social network of support during the hospital treatment and outside the hospital treatment;
- Professional work with patients' families (improvement of communication between family members, strengthening of mutual relations, strengthening of cohesion in the family) and
- Connects with the institutions in the system for assistance in exercising the rights and services of the patients from the health care and social protection system. Collaborates with citizens' associations, humanitarian organizations and others.
- Participates in the discharge of the patient from the health institution.

During the treatment in health institutions, in the work with patients, the social worker applies methods of work with: individual, group and local community. Educated social workers also apply systemic family therapy.

The Role of Social Workers during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic is a serious global health problem for society as a whole, which means "an objective event or situation caused by complex social events, natural disasters and deviant behaviors that adversely affect an individual, social groups or communities in a way that makes difficult or disables social functioning and satisfying of human needs, the consequences of which cannot be overcome without organized social support" (McCoy, 2000).

From the outbreak of the pandemic until today, countries around the world have had to respond in the first line of dealing with the negative effects of it through health care systems. Through the health care systems, so they could give an appropriate response for protection and treatment, but also prevention of the population. Although health and the smooth functioning of health care systems have become a priority, in the period since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a result of protection measures (isolation, physical distancing and restricted movement), social functioning has become difficult and disabled throughout the world population. In order to overcome the situation of difficult and disabled social functioning of all, including the stakeholders of

the health care systems worldwide and in the Republic of North Macedonia, who should provide assistance and support to the citizens, the main need arisen is a way to develop good mechanisms for smooth functioning of the health care systems in conditions of emergency and crisis, but also to design standards and procedures for action of the actors in the citizen protection systems, in conditions of pandemic, state of emergency and / or crisis.

From the very first day, when the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia faced the problem of the pandemic, it seriously follows and monitors the situation with the coronavirus infection and in accordance with the recommendations of the World Health Organization through the recommendations received from the Commission for Infectious Diseases, as an expert advisory body for handling of Coronavirus/COVID-19, constantly monitors the epidemiological situation in the country. Based on that, the Government adopts measures and recommendations for protection and prevention of Covid-19, including the working protocols of the health institutions. In order to respond to the needs of patients in the country who are positive and sick patients with Covid-19, and who need hospitalization, the line Ministry of Health established regional Covid centers in cities where there are already general hospitals and health homes.

Social workers as part of professional associates in health care institutions perform their professional work in accordance with all adopted measures, recommendations for protection and prevention of Covid-19 and the protocols of health care institutions. They are included in the team in the part of providing social services from social protection to patients who are in hospital and in day hospital treatment and are at social risk.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many of the activities of social workers were justifiably prevented or carried out with difficulty in carrying out their professional work, which referred to: professional assistance and support to patients and their families in overcoming individual and family problems aimed at strengthening patients, ensuring and maintaining well-being and independence and their long-term training for independent overcoming of social problems, group work with patients, individual and group counseling work to prevent, mitigate and overcome the consequences of patients' social problems, direct meetings and contacts with patients' families, community social work, field activities and family visits, cooperation with institutions, citizen associations, humanitarian organizations, etc. Problems have appeared in informing and referencing patients to available social protection rights and services, the primary estimation and referencing to other institutions in order to fulfil an unobstructed approach to their rights and services they require.

Methodology

The goal of this research is to gain information on the situation of social workers working in the health system, during the Covid -19 pandemic. A part of the research was to acknowledge the consequences of the Covid 19 pandemic's influence on the expert work of social workers in our health system.

Methods and techniques of the research: A quantitative method was used in the research, and a survey questionnaire was used to study the condition and professional work of social workers in the system. The aim of the research is to find out what problems social workers working in the health system face in their professional work with patients and their families during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research sample included 33 social workers working in secondary and tertiary health protection in North Macedonia.

Results

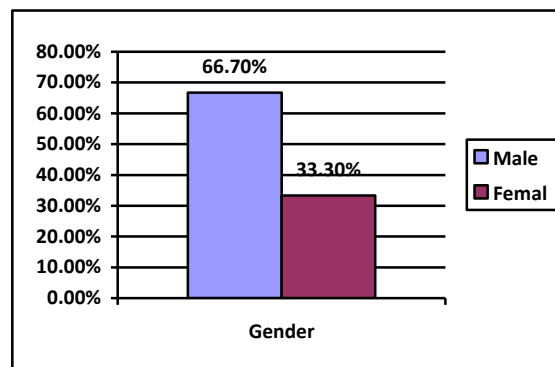


Figure 1. Gender structure of the respondents

Regarding the gender structure of the respondents, 23 or a total of 66.7% of the respondents are female, and 10 respondents or 33.3% are male social workers.

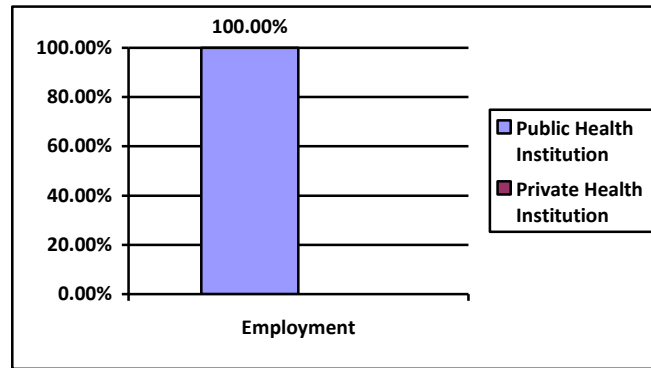


Figure 2. Employment of respondents

In terms of employability, a total of 33 respondents, or 100% are social workers working in public health institutions of secondary and tertiary health care in the country.

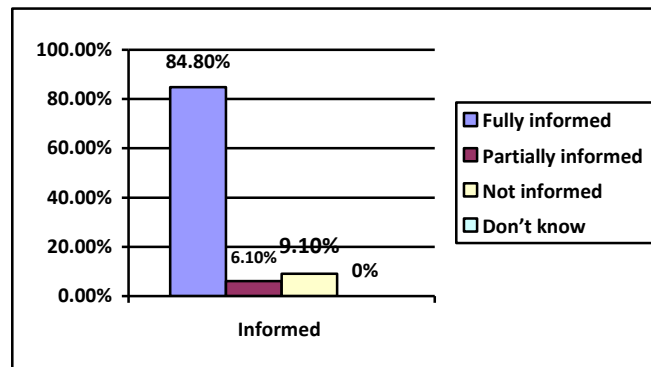


Figure 3. Informed the respondents

Regarding the questions how many of the respondents were informed about the measures and recommendations for protection and prevention of Covid-19 from the health institution where they work. A total of 27 or 84.8% stated they were informed, while 9.1% of the respondents were insufficiently informed by the health institutions where they work.

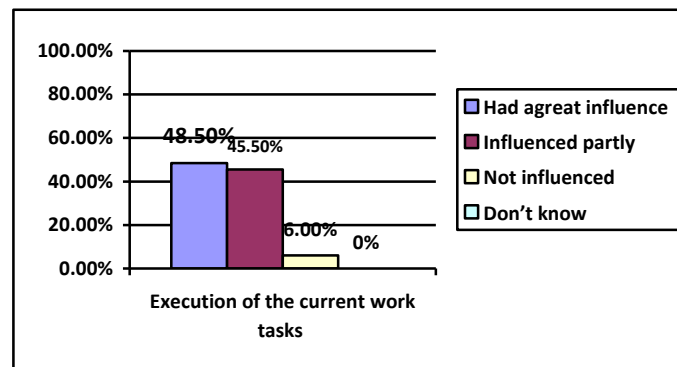


Figure 4. Execution of the current work tasks

Regarding the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on social workers in performing of their current work tasks, a total of 15 or 48.5% of the respondents stated that the Covid-19 pandemic has a very negative impact on performing of their current work tasks with patients and families, and a total of 13 or 45,5% consider to be partially affected.

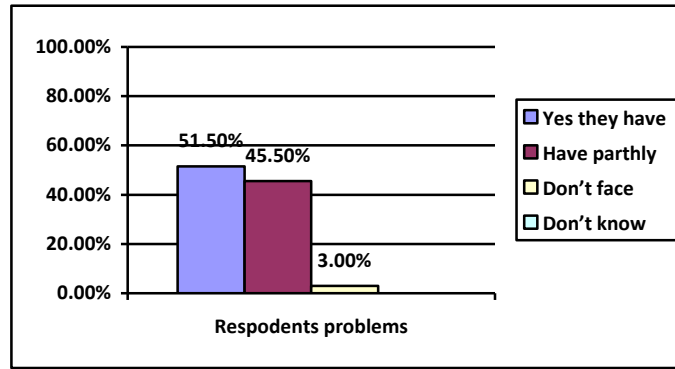


Figure 5. Problem's respondents

Regarding the question of what problems, they face while performing their professional work, a total of 17 respondents or 51.5% had a problem in the part of the group work with the patients. This is due to the result of observance and observance of measures and recommendations for protection and prevention of Covid-19, including the working protocols of the institutions.

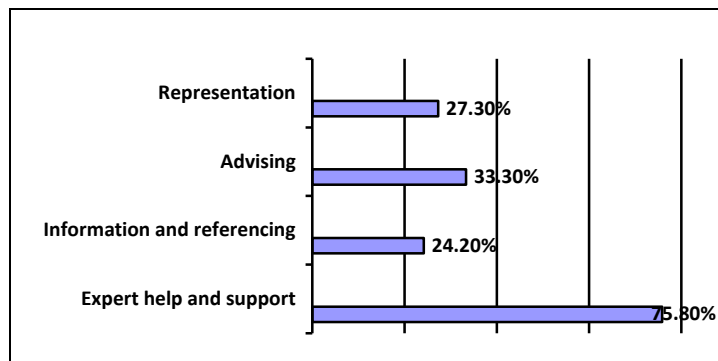


Figure 6. The type of social services

Regarding the question which social services from the professional work with patients and their families were a problem in terms of their provision, a total of 25 respondents or 75.8% stated that it was the provision of professional assistance and support, a total of 8 or 24.2% respondents thinks that informing and referring patients to institutions for exercising their rights in health and social care is a problem.

Conclusion

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide has caused a serious health crisis that has grown into a socio-economic and humanitarian crisis with strong negative implications for countries. Due to the rapid spread of the virus, many countries have been forced to impose full or partial restrictions on the movement of people, quarantine, isolation, closure of some public facilities in order to localize the infection and maximize the sustainability of the health, economic and social system in conditions of a present pandemic.

The Republic of North Macedonia in conditions of Covid-19 pandemic mobilized all necessary resources in the country, especially in the field of health care, to respond to the needs of citizens in the field of prevention and hospital treatment of positive and sick patients from Covid-19 in health facilities in the country. A series of measures and recommendations for protection and prevention of Covid-19 were adopted, including the work protocols in institutions.

Social workers as part of professional associates in the health care institutions on the secondary and tertiary level of health care, with the appearance of the pandemic and during the past period of time, in their professional work are guided in accordance with the adopted measures, recommendations for protection and prevention and protocols for work of health institutions in conditions of the Covid- 19 pandemic.

From the conducted research, it was concluded that the Covid-19 pandemic has influence on the area of the professional work of social workers in the part of: individual and group social work with patients and their

families, providing professional assistance and support to patients and their families, in individual and group counseling work, informing and referring patients in social and health institutions about the rights and services of social protection.

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