

Social workers help you access the supports you need

By: Vicki Verge

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Is your glass half empty or half full?

Ask a social worker, and they might remind you that your glass is refillable. They might help identify and remove barriers preventing you from accessing the tap. They might let you know that you can add ice, or use a different glass. In short, they'll work hard to find what solutions and supports you need to ensure your glass is always full when you need it to be.

I'm speaking figuratively, of course, but as a part of your health-care team, a social worker can make a positive difference in your health, well-being, and quality of life.

To paraphrase the official definition offered by the International Federation of Social Workers, social work is an academic discipline that promotes social change, social cohesion and empowerment. It engages people and structures to better address life challenges and enhance well-being.

In the world of health care, what that often breaks down to helping the most vulnerable members of society access health care and social supports they might not realize are available, but to which they are entitled.

A social worker's job is underpinned by a commitment to social justice and health equity. To understand this concept, it's important to draw a distinction between the concepts of equality and equity.

Let's say, for example, that two people are treated for cancer. Both receive the same surgery and chemotherapy, but whereas one is discharged to a home where he enjoys benefits of financial security and a supportive family to aid in his recovery, the other lives alone in conditions of poverty and social disadvantage. The first patient can easily afford his prescriptions, but the second must choose between food and medicine, because he cannot afford both.

Even though both patients received "equal" care in hospital, one is at a clear and unfair disadvantage.

In this scenario, a social worker would explore means by which the second patient could access supports that would serve to help level the playing field. These might include connecting him with financial supports, professional home care, transportation to followup appointments, and whatever else he might need to improve his chances for recovery. That is equity in action, and it's at the heart of what social workers do.

Barriers to care aren't always grounded in finances, of course. An elderly patient in the early stages of dementia, for instance, might have a reasonable income and be free from other socioeconomic concerns, but still need help in maintaining their independence. In that scenario, a social worker might put them or their caregivers in touch with resources such as support services, wander guards, Meals on Wheels, or a "memory phone" that allows them to call their daughter, rather than having to remember a phone number.

I've often said that social workers have to have a really big tool kit, and as we celebrate Social Work Month in March, it's a good time to salute their often unheralded role as a bridge between challenges and solutions.

There are still many misconceptions about social work. Many people equate the role exclusively with child protection or helping people attain financial assistance. Others don't realize that social work is not the work of "do-gooders," but an academic discipline requiring many years of post-secondary education and training. Social workers must be registered with the Manitoba College of Social Workers and are expected to practise within their code of ethics and standards of practice.

The fact is that Manitoba's more than 2,300 social workers wear many hats, and are dedicated to their profession. In hospital settings, social workers are valued members of the treatment team. In the community health services centres, they provide counselling to individuals or families, helping them meet their health and psychosocial needs.

And while social workers are part of the health services team, they also fill the role of advocate, frequently lobbying for policy and process change that facilitates a more equitable distribution of resources. In the event of a conflict between patients and their health care providers, it is social workers who often employ their unique skill set to find ways forward that work for all concerned.

The one thing a social worker won't do is dictate what you can and cannot do. As firm believers in the right to self-determination, our goal is to "meet you where you are" in terms of life circumstances, and to connect you with the information and social services solutions that work best for you.

It's important to know that you don't need a doctor's referral to connect with a social worker. All Winnipeg hospitals — and many in rural Manitoba — have social workers on staff. Similarly, community health care clinics can usually connect you with a social worker. Ask to speak to one.

For more information about social workers, visit casw-acts.ca/en/what-social-work

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What is social work?

Social work is a profession dedicated to helping individuals, families, groups and communities enhance their individual and collective well-being. Its objectives include:

Helping people obtain services relating to their basic human needs

Counselling of individuals, families and groups

Helping communities and groups provide or improve social and health services

To assess, remediate and prevent social problems encountered by individuals, families and communities

To enhance individual, family and community social functioning

Source: Manitoba College of Social Workers

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