

Current State of Practitioners Delivering Social Work Services in Provincial Hospitals in Vietnam

Nguyen Thi Hoai An¹

Abstract

Social work in health care is one of the most effective sectors in which hospital social workers operate in numerous nations. To guarantee effective social welfare services, providers depend on their capacity to create superior services tailored to each client group. These social workers enhance the quality and productivity of hospital service. In Vietnam, the depiction of hospital social workers at the provincial level has yet to be comprehensively documented in prior research. This study aims to clarify the existing circumstances of social work personnel at provincial hospitals across Vietnam and offer crucial recommendations to enhance the quality of human resources delivering social work services in hospitals.

Keywords: Social Workers, Social Work Services, Provincial Hospitals, Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

Social work nowadays is an indispensable component of the health care system in developed countries. In Vietnam, social work in hospitals is a very new field. Currently, 100% of central hospitals, 97% of provincial hospitals, and nearly 90% of district and district hospitals have established social work departments or groups. There are about 1,605 full-time social workers and more than 6,000 social work collaborators (Ministry of Health, 2023). Since its inception, the social work service in hospitals has significantly contributed to improving the quality of healthcare facilities, serving as a bridge of compassion between the hospital, doctors, medical staff, and patients and their families, providing both spiritual and material support, and helping to bring better access to healthcare services for patients. It is crucial to thoroughly investigate and evaluate the existing human resources that deliver social work services in Vietnam hospitals to establish a successful and enduring strategy for developing these services; especially at provincial levels due to the limited research on social work services in healthcare in Vietnam.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study was conducted at five provincial hospitals in Vietnam, including Nghe An Obstetrics and Pediatrics Hospital, Nghe An Oncology Hospital, Southwest Nghe An General Hospital, Vinh City General Hospital, and Thanh Chuong General Hospital. The study includes 105 employees directly involved in social work services at five hospitals. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to clarify the depiction of the social work team delivering social services in provincial hospitals in Vietnam. Indeed, a typical characteristic of social work departments in Vietnamese hospitals is that all social work team members are designated as social workers. As a result, the individuals involved in this research encompass not only formally trained professional social workers who have undergone formal education in social work at colleges, universities, or postgraduate institutions but also individuals from other fields currently employed as social workers in hospitals. The survey is centered around topics concerning the personal details of the respondents, including gender, age, professional credentials, the field of study, and professional background. Subsequently, various conversations have taken place regarding enhancing the standard of social work services in hospitals by establishing a conducive work atmosphere and enhancing the expertise of the personnel within the medical facilities.

Research Outcomes and Discussion

The main findings of this study focus on describing the current situation of social work service providers in provincial hospitals in Vietnam. Questions focused on issues related to the interviewee's personal information,

¹ M.A. Faculty of Tourism and Social Work, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vinh university, Vietnam, Email: hoaiannnguyen88@gmail.com

including age, professional qualifications, training major, and work experience. Then, recommendations will be made on improving the quality of social work service provision in provincial hospitals in Nghe An province and nationwide.

Age and Gender of Social Work Staff in Provincial Hospital

The survey results from the research on social workers in provincial hospitals revealed a significant gender disparity in the field. Specifically, women comprise 89.5% of the workforce, while men account for 10.5%. The number of female employees is nine times higher.

The gender gap among hospital social workers can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, most current hospital social workers hold bachelor's degrees in common fields such as social work, journalism and communications, economics, law, and languages. These fields mostly attract more women than men. Additionally, women often possess advantageous qualities for working in public sectors, such as caring, sensitivity, sympathy, gentleness, affection, devotion, and understanding (Kite,2001; Worell,2001). These qualities are essential for effective patient support and are also necessary for social work activities.

Towards the age of social work staff at provincial hospitals, currently, the highest proportion of officials falls within the age range of 30 to under 40, accounting for 43.8% of the total. Meanwhile, officials aged 25 to 29 make up 28.6%, and those aged 35 to 39 represent 14.3%. The number of young officials under 25 and highly qualified staff both have an equal ratio of 6.7%. The chart indicates that individuals under 45 are not represented among social workers.

Chart 2: Age of social worker staff in provincial hospitals (%)

The youthful workforce is a key asset for social workers in provincial hospitals in Vietnam. They can acquire new knowledge and technology quickly, adapt to various conditions, and maintain good health, which makes them invaluable. Furthermore, employees aged 30 to 39 bring a wealth of work experience, serving as an additional resource alongside the younger staff. These two groups complement each other, ultimately enhancing the hospital system's service delivery efficiency.

Professional Qualifications of Social Work Staff in Provincial Hospital

Research conducted on 105 social workers at five provincial hospitals shows that employees with university degrees account for the highest proportion (58.1%), followed by the proportion of public employees. Social workers have intermediate/college degrees (34.3%), and social workers with postgraduate degrees account for the lowest proportion at 7.6%. This data shows that the quality of social work human resources working at provincial hospitals compared to the general level of other positions in the hospital is quite high.

With a high percentage of social workers with university degrees, this is a positive signal when the agency has a plan and investment strategy to develop the team through recruiting high-quality human resources. High professional qualifications are a factor that ensures work efficiency in providing patient support services in the hospital. However, of the number of staff providing social work services in the hospital system, the proportion of staff who graduated with a social work major only accounts for 5.5% of the total number of service providers. Most hospital social workers graduated from other fields, such as medicine, pharmacy, nursing, journalism, economics, and law. None of the surveyed samples included employees with a master's degree in social work in this research.

According to Circular No. 43/2015/TT-BYT issued on November 26, 2015, which outlines the responsibilities and organizational structure for the implementation of social work tasks in hospitals, the human resources of the Social Work Department/Group include officials and employees specializing in social work, communications, health, or other social sciences, who have received training and education in social work (Ministry of Health, 2015). Consequently, due to the shortage of specialized social work professionals, many hospitals have had to reassign staff from other departments and divisions to fulfill the role of social workers. Additionally, in some instances, the doctors and medical staff team have had to take on social work responsibilities alongside their primary duties. Approximately 90% of social workers are simultaneously

employed in other roles and professions, including doctors and hospital nurses. Indeed, they possess extensive medical knowledge, yet they lack an understanding of social work and the necessary tools to provide psychological counseling to those in need (Thai, 2023). While certain hospitals may have a team of qualified social workers (with relevant degrees), they often need more comprehensive training in social work in hospitals. This presents significant obstacles for social workers in provincial hospitals in Vietnam.

Training Activities for Social Worker Staff at Provincial Hospitals

Research on five provincial hospitals shows that the professional qualifications of social work staff in provincial hospitals still need to be improved. It can be attributed to social work being a relatively new field in Vietnam, officially recognized in 2010. Specifically, the field of Social Work in hospitals was not approved until 2011 by the Ministry of Health, with the endorsement of the "Project for Developing the Social Work Profession in the Health Sector." To effectively implement the Ministry of Health's project, medical facilities, and hospital systems must adjust their functions to accommodate social work activities and services as per regulations. However, the challenge lies in the difficulty of recruiting an adequate number of professional social workers for hospitals, as this is contingent upon the facility's overall human resource recruitment needs. Within the framework, numerous hospitals assign existing staff members to perform social work duties. Most social work personnel in provincial hospitals are not equipped with social work qualifications. While the medical staff possesses specialized medical expertise, they lack professional social work knowledge and skills (Ministry of Health, 2023). Consequently, the standard of social work personnel in Vietnamese provincial hospitals remains below regional and international standards.

Furthermore, the research also indicates that the training of Social Work knowledge for hospital Social Workers is still inadequate and lacks professionalism. While universities, colleges, and vocational schools in Vietnam offer social work training, it is not specialised and focuses primarily on hospital social work. Most educational institutions only provide short-term training courses in hospital Social Work with certificates. Among the medical and pharmaceutical universities in Vietnam, only the University of Public Health offers a bachelor's program in hospital Social Work. This study further supports the findings of Pham Tien Nam and colleagues (2020) on Social Work activities in Vietnamese hospitals from 2011 to 2020. The research reveals that only 7% of central and provincial hospitals nationwide guide social work practice (32 hospitals); 10.87% of hospitals collaborate with educational institutions to train and enhance medical knowledge for social workers, and only 19.4% of hospitals nationwide have a team of social workers trained in social work.

Working Experience of Social Workers in Provincial Hospitals

The experience of social work staff in provincial hospitals directly influences the effectiveness of social work service provision. When examining the correlation between experience and work efficiency, most interviewees generally believe that the staff's experience with patients and their families is determined by their experiences and interactions with patients, families, and medical staff. The services provided to patients and their families include guidance, general information on medical examinations and treatments, communication, raising awareness, psychosocial support, connecting resources, and funding support. Besides, for medical staff, social workers provide information about patients to medical staff when necessary to support treatment and encourage and share with medical staff when there are problems with patients during the treatment process.

The findings indicate that the level of experience of social workers in hospitals significantly impacts the quality of service delivery. More than half of the employees (58%) have 1-5 years of experience, with 31.4% having 3-5 years, 17.1% having 1-3 years, and 9.5% having less than one year of experience. The social workers, who have accumulated years of experience, make up 48% of the total workforce in the Social Work Department. Among them, 22.9% have 5 to 7 years of experience, while 19% have 7 years or more. The need for more experienced personnel in social work is a major factor limiting the quality of hospital services. The current situation of social work in Vietnamese hospitals is that the country only began implementing social work in healthcare in 2015. After nine years of development, the social work team faces numerous challenges and requires dedication to the profession.

Furthermore, according to hospital managers' perspective, the lack of experience among social workers in hospitals is attributed to the frequent transfers of staff from other departments to the social work department; after a while, they are transferred to other departments and offices, which reduces the number of years of experience and greatly affects the provision of professional social work services at the hospital. This practice diminishes the overall years of experience and significantly impacts the quality of social work services provided at the hospital. Based on the findings of this research, it is evident that the social work department has a very restricted number of employees in the hospital's workforce. Most of them are contract labourers. Consequently, the income of these employees is relatively low (basic salaries ranging from less than 5,000,000 to 10,000,000 VND per month). Insufficient earnings and the absence of job security are reasons employees are hesitant to remain in the field. Research findings indicate that individuals with less experience tend to receive lower salaries and report lower levels of job satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that the level of experience of social workers in hospitals significantly impacts the quality of service delivery. More than half of the employees (58%) have 1-5 years of experience, with 31.4% having 3-5 years, 17.1% having 1-3 years, and 9.5% having less than one year of experience. The social workers, who have accumulated years of experience, make up 48% of the total workforce in the Social Work Department. Among them, 22.9% have 5 to 7 years of experience, while 19% have 7 years or more. The need for more experienced personnel in social work is a major factor limiting the quality of hospital services. The current situation of social work in Vietnamese hospitals is that the country only began implementing social work in healthcare in 2015. After nine years of development, the social work team faces numerous challenges and requires dedication to the profession.

The research outcomes indicate that the human resources involved in delivering social work services in provincial hospitals still need to improve in quantity and quality, particularly in terms of professional qualifications, skills, and experience in providing social work services. Furthermore, the current working age is seen as an advantage for those providing services in provincial hospitals, as it represents a young workforce capable of quickly absorbing new knowledge and technology and easily adapting to different conditions and circumstances. Given these advantages and limitations, the social work team providing services in Vietnam's provincial hospitals must change to address the need to provide social work services in hospitals better.

Based on the findings regarding the status of social workers in provincial hospitals, this article aims to provide suggestions for enhancing and advancing the capabilities of social workers to improve the quality of social work services in hospitals. Firstly, Training institutions must prioritize training professional social workers in the medical sector to ensure a skilled workforce that aligns with societal needs and professional standards. This objective can be achieved by establishing specialized university programs and developing intensive training courses in social work in healthcare. Additionally, provincial health facilities need to establish a strategy for enhancing the skills and qualifications of their staff by offering various training programs, short courses, and continuous education opportunities. It will ultimately lead to more efficient service delivery and better preparedness for the staff directly involved in providing social work services in hospitals. The shortage of experienced social work professionals could arise in the future due to extended leaves of absence caused by challenges related to job security and salary levels.

Thirdly, professional working skills are crucial in achieving success in any profession. Therefore, regular training sessions are essential to enhance patient care, emotional management, and communication skills. The current situation highlights the effectiveness of social workers at the provincial level in delivering hospital services. However, there is a need to strengthen professional social work activities such as case management, psychosocial intervention, and support services for medical staff to improve the quality of comprehensive medical care. Last but not least, the research discovered that provincial health facilities lack a thorough understanding of the significance of psychosocial support for patients and health workers. Instead, they primarily offer communication services, guide medical procedures, sponsorships, and raise funds for patients with special needs. Therefore, it is an urgent need to standardise social work within hospitals to enhance the

effectiveness of providing professional social work services and gradually introduce clinical social work services in hospitals following the models of developed countries.

REFERENCES

- Kite, Mary E. (2001). "Gender Stereotypes", In Worell, Judith (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Women and Gender*. Academic Press.1, pp. 563.
- Ministry of Health (2011). Decision No. 2514/QĐ-BYT. Project for developing social work profession in the health sector for the period 2011-2020.
- Ministry of Health (2015). Circular No. 43/2015/TT-BYT. Promulgating regulations on tasks and forms of organizing social work tasks in hospitals.
- Ministry of Health (2023). Enhancing the efficiency of social work initiatives within hospitals, [online] Available at: Tiếp tục nâng cao hiệu quả hoạt động công tác xã hội trong bệnh viện - Tin nổi bật - Cổng thông tin Bộ Y tế (moh.gov.vn) [accessed 4/4/2024].
- Nam Pham Tien, Nguyen Hong Son, Hoang Long Quan, & Hoang Van Minh. (2020). Hospital Social Work in Viet Nam in the period 2011- 2020: Achievements and Challenges. *Journal of Health and Development Studies*, 4 (1), pp. 13- 15.
- Nam Pham Tien (2021). Assessing the outcomes of establishing Social work departments/ teams in several hospitals in Vietnam from 2010-2020, *HNUE Journal of Science*, 66 (1), pp. 118-125.
- Nam Pham Tien, et al. (2022), Hospital social work education in Vietnam: achievements, challenges, and lessons learned. *Social Work Education*, 8(42), pp. 1510-1525.
- Nguyen Ngoc Huong (2020). Social work in healthcare worldwide and its application in Vietnam. *Journal of Health and Development Studies*, 4 (1), pp. 8-12.
- Thai, B. (2023). What regulations will the Ministry of Health amend to make hospital social work activities truly effective? Accessed February 26, 2024 at <https://bvquan5.medinet.gov.vn/chuyen-muc/bo-y-te-se-sua-doi-quy-dinh-gi-de-hoat-dong-cong-tac-xa-hoi-benh-vien-...31.aspx>.