

THE SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE IN HEALTH CARE



Amy Doming, medical social worker at Baton Rouge General, begins her day participating in the daily staffing.

PHOTO: GLENDA BANTA

IN 1905, A DOCTOR at the Massachusetts General Hospital found that treating the psychosocial needs of the patient as well as their physical needs created better results. With this observation, the field of medical social work was born.

Since then, medical social workers have been working with other disciplines, such as doctors and nurses, in hospitals, rehabilitation settings, licensed nursing facilities, hospice programs and the community to evaluate and implement interventions for a wide range of patients and their families. Working within an interdisciplinary team, medical social workers unite patients and families with desperately needed resources and support systems.

Emmett Irwin has been a medical social worker for the past 12 years, working with patients undergoing orthopedic procedures. He provides patient care throughout the process—from conducting pre-surgical classes discussing the surgery to helping the patient plan the discharge. “Patients receive the best care when their needs are assessed and handled by a caring and committed team. I work in concert with the nursing staff, physicians and families to assure all their needs are met,” says Irwin. He feels his training as

a social worker uniquely prepared him to fill his role.

Amy Doming, medical social worker at Baton Rouge General Medical Center, begins her day participating in the daily staffing. The staffing includes the social worker, nursing staff, dietitians and physical therapists. “The social workers at Baton Rouge General work together as a true team. We cross-train to assure we understand the needs of patients in all units of the hospital,” said Amy. “Social workers fill many roles in the hospital—from providing support to patients diagnosed with cancer or HIV to coordinating resources for the patient once they return home.”

The Baton Rouge General Medical Center employs a large number of medical social workers, who are available in each unit, including the regional burn unit, emergency room and the Pennington Cancer Center. The social work staff also plays a critical role in coordinating blood and organ donations as well as other medical directives. Their efforts extend into the community. They help coordinate events such as the Komen Race for the Cure, Heart Walk and the burn camp.

Stephanie Minvielle has worked as a medical social worker at Woman’s

Hospital for the past 13 years. She spends most days working with new mothers and mothers-to-be, including all teen mothers 17 years old and younger, as well as birth and adoptive parents. She also spends time with the mothers who have experienced stillbirth and infant death. The social services department at Woman’s provides education programs on postpartum depression and domestic violence, and runs support groups for NICU parents and pregnancy and infant loss.

“The Social Services staff at Woman’s Hospital has all been here for a number of years,” said Minvielle. “We all love our jobs, but when it becomes stressful we make sure to care for ourselves. One of the best things I do to relieve stress is to work out at the Woman’s Center for Wellness Fitness Club.”

Medical social workers provide needed services to both patients and their families. One social worker said they decided to dedicate their career to medical social work because they had experienced being on the other side when a friend fought a battle with cancer. It was all of the support they received from social workers that allowed them to cope.

While many sectors of the economy are shrinking, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics is projecting a 24% increase in employment of medical social workers. There will be a need for nearly 154,000 medical social workers by the year 2016. ¹⁰



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