

The Challenges and Strategies of Social Workers in the Care of the Elderly with Chronic Illness

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Abstract

The objective of the research is to identify, analyse, and understand the challenges faced by social workers in the care of older persons suffering from chronic diseases, as well as to describe and strategies used in addressing them. The research method uses a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interviews with four social workers who have experience treating elderly people suffering from chronic diseases. The techniques used are interviews and observations, which are then analyzed using content analysis techniques. Research results show that social workers face several significant challenges in the care of older persons with chronic diseases, including the medical complexity of chronic disease, social isolation, mobility constraints, and financial problems. In addition, social workers also face obstacles in coordinating with various health and care services. However, it also developed various effective strategies, such as collaborative approaches with multidisciplinary care teams, intensive emotional support, and providing education to patients and their families. The results of the research can conclude that social workers have an important role to play in addressing the complex challenges in the care of older people with chronic diseases. The strategy applied can help improve the quality of life of patients and support their families in the face of emerging problems.

Keywords: *Social workers, Ageing, Chronic Diseases, Challenges, Strategies, Care.*



A. INTRODUCTION

According to the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency (BPS), in 2021, the elderly population (those aged 60 and above) reached 27.6 million people, accounting for approximately 10% of the total population in Indonesia. Furthermore, BPS projections indicate that this figure is likely to continue increasing, in line with rising life expectancy and declining birth rates, as observed in many other developing countries (source: <https://www.bps.go.id/2021>).

The increasing growth of the elderly population poses its own challenges, especially in addressing the rising healthcare and social needs. In the context of caring for the elderly with chronic illnesses, understanding the impact of the growing elderly population is of paramount importance. The expanding elderly population is a result of increased life expectancy (Tanaya et al., 2015). The growth in the elderly population affects the role of families in elderly care, heightens the demand for social support, and raises questions about economic well-being (Mulyati et al., 2018).

The elderly tend to experience complex chronic illnesses, presenting significant challenges in healthcare. This increases the demand for long-term health and care services and drives the need for changes in healthcare provision (Utomo, A. S., 2019). Understanding these developments is crucial for designing effective solutions for

caring for the elderly with chronic diseases and supporting increasingly complex community needs.

According to research conducted by Baroroh, D. B., & Irafayani, N. (2012), family plays a highly significant role in providing care to the elderly who are sick or dependent in their daily activities. Furthermore, families caring for elderly parents experiencing dependency also face physical, emotional, social, and economic impacts during this caregiving process (Luthfa, I., 2018). Additionally, Tetsuka, S. (2021) explains that the elderly undergo gradual physical, social, and psychological changes, which can lead to health issues such as dementia. Degenerative diseases faced by the elderly have the potential to cause disability, thus affecting productivity. Therefore, caregiver assistance is often required to help the elderly who have lost independence in daily activities such as eating, dressing, and personal care (Aquino Amigo et al., 2019).

The elderly have a higher risk of experiencing chronic diseases compared to younger age groups (HS, F. R., 2014). Chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and cancer tend to emerge or worsen with age, as indicated by research by Lindayani et al. (2017) and Anggraini et al. (2023). These diseases are more common among the elderly due to hormonal changes, prolonged exposure to risk factors, and a declining immune system. Regular monitoring, medication use, and lifestyle changes are often necessary for the management of chronic diseases. Chronic illnesses can reduce the quality of life for the elderly. Yusefa et al. (2023) explain that symptoms like chronic pain, fatigue, and physical limitations can restrict daily activities and mobility. Therefore, long-term care for chronic diseases often entails substantial costs, especially if it involves doctor visits, medications, and other medical treatments. This can impact the financial aspects of the elderly and their families.

The increasing prevalence of chronic diseases underscores the importance of prevention efforts, both in the form of a healthy lifestyle (such as proper nutrition and exercise) and early detection and effective disease management. Social workers play a central role in the care of the elderly facing chronic illnesses. They can provide emotional support, coordinate care, assess social situations, advocate for patient rights, educate families, and plan for the future of the elderly. The role of social workers can also help improve the quality of life for the elderly and assist both the elderly and their families in coping with the complexities of challenges brought about by chronic diseases. This research is not only beneficial for helping the elderly suffering from chronic diseases but is also crucial for understanding and enhancing the care and quality of life for an increasing elderly population.

The article is relevant to the practice of social work concerning the elderly population, placing the role of social workers at the forefront of elderly care. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the challenges faced by social workers in addressing the complexity of caring for the elderly with chronic diseases, with the hope of providing insights into how social workers work with the elderly. The main objective of this research is to identify, analyze, and comprehend the challenges

encountered by social workers in the care of the elderly suffering from chronic illnesses, as well as to elucidate the strategies employed to address these issues.

In-depth findings from the research delve into the detailed medical and psychosocial problems that arise in the care of the elderly. Additionally, it analyzes the underlying factors that give rise to these challenges while focusing on understanding the impact of these challenges on the physical and emotional well-being of the elderly under care. Further discussions elaborate on specific strategies employed by social workers, including a collaborative approach, intensive emotional support, and efforts to provide effective support to the elderly. With this approach, the research aims to offer a more comprehensive perspective on the relevant issues in the care of the elderly with chronic diseases.

B. METHOD

The research method employed in this study is a qualitative approach. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with three experienced social workers involved in caring for the elderly with chronic diseases. The participants in the research were individuals with practical knowledge of the challenges faced by social workers in the care of the elderly with complex chronic conditions. In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted direct observations to gain deeper insights into the interactions and actions of social workers in the context of elderly care. Data obtained from interviews and observations were subsequently analyzed using content analysis techniques. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain a profound understanding of the day-to-day challenges confronted by social workers in the care of the elderly with chronic diseases and the strategies they employ to address these issues.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that the medical complexity of chronic diseases is one of the primary challenges faced by social workers in caring for the elderly with chronic illnesses. Medical complexity encompasses various aspects such as diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing care. As social workers involved in these matters, it is crucial to have a deep understanding of the medical aspects of chronic diseases, including their impact on the physical and mental health of the elderly. Additionally, social workers are advised to consistently coordinate with multidisciplinary medical care teams to ensure effective service delivery.

Based on the interview results, it is evident that social workers face various challenges, including:

1. Communicating medical information to the elderly and their families in easily understandable language.
2. Dealing with feelings of confusion and anxiety that often arise due to medical complexity.
3. Providing emotional support and motivation to encourage the elderly to adhere to recommended treatments.

Medical complexity significantly affects the role of social workers in coordinating healthcare and the necessary health resources. Social workers must actively communicate with various stakeholders, including doctors, nurses, and medical specialists, to ensure that the elderly with chronic illnesses receive comprehensive care. In connection with this, research findings indicate that a deep understanding of the medical complexity of chronic diseases is key to comprehending the roles and challenges of social workers in the care of the elderly with chronic illnesses.

Regarding social isolation, research results indicate that social isolation is a significant challenge in the care of the elderly with chronic illnesses. Isolation can diminish the social support services provided by social workers to patients. Social workers explain that many elderly individuals with chronic illnesses experience feelings of loneliness and limited social interaction due to mobility limitations. These issues affect the emotional well-being of patients and hinder their efforts to cope with chronic illnesses.

To address the challenge of social isolation, social workers have developed several effective strategies. Social workers actively promote social interaction through community programs and support groups for the elderly. Additionally, social workers provide intensive emotional support, including counseling and a psychosocial-oriented approach. Social workers act as mediators for the elderly to build stronger social relationships with their families, friends, and communities. Furthermore, social workers play a role in assisting patients in accessing resources and services that can reduce isolation, such as safe transportation and home healthcare services.

Research findings related to physical mobility limitations indicate that such limitations have an impact on the elderly with chronic illnesses' access to healthcare services. The elderly often face difficulties in utilizing healthcare facilities, which hinder them from attending regular check-ups or following recommended medical treatments. This, in turn, can lead to delays in necessary care and affect the quality of care provided.

Social workers, as part of the care team, develop strategies to address these mobility limitations. One of these strategies is to provide home healthcare services for the elderly who have difficulty traveling. This is aimed at ensuring that patients receive appropriate care without the need for extensive travel. Additionally, social workers play a role in coordinating safe transportation services for the elderly who require them. Furthermore, social workers provide recommendations regarding assistive devices that can enhance the mobility of the elderly at home, such as wheelchairs or other mobility aids.

Research findings also highlight economic challenges. The elderly with chronic illnesses often face high costs associated with medical care, medications, and long-term care, leading to serious financial stress and hindering their ability to access necessary treatment. Some patients are even forced to choose between buying medications or meeting other basic needs. Research results indicate that economic

issues have a significant impact on the care of the elderly suffering from chronic diseases.

Social workers play a crucial role in addressing these issues. They collaborate with patients and their families to create financial plans that help manage the costs of care. Additionally, social workers can assist patients in identifying available financial resources, such as government assistance programs or charitable funds, to alleviate the financial burden. As educators, social workers can provide education on how to optimize health insurance benefits and utilize relevant assistance programs.

The role of social workers extends beyond direct patient care to building effective collaboration with multidisciplinary care teams and providing the necessary education to patients and their families. Collaborative strategies can help ensure that the care of the elderly with chronic illnesses becomes more holistic and coordinated, while education can enhance patients' understanding of their conditions and the steps they need to take to maintain their health.

Tackling the challenges faced by social workers in caring for the elderly with chronic illnesses involves several complex aspects. One of the primary challenges is medical complexity, as elderly individuals with chronic illnesses often confront intricate health issues that necessitate intensive care (Fadilla, N. M., 2021). Physical and cognitive limitations in the elderly make them more vulnerable to injuries and difficulties in managing their chronic conditions. Moreover, social isolation is also a serious issue, as mobility limitations and health problems can lead to social isolation among the elderly, which, in turn, can affect their emotional well-being (Nandani, 2020).

Patient compliance in following the recovery plan for chronic illnesses is also a crucial factor in the success of chronic disease management. According to a WHO report in 2003, the average patient compliance with long-term therapy for chronic diseases in developed countries was only 50%, and in developing countries, this number was even lower (Aliviyanti, 2014). Therefore, a healthcare system and proactive integrated approach are needed to effectively manage chronic diseases (Lihawa, Novian., & Hadjaratie, 2022).

The Human Ecology Theory can be applied in social work practice, especially when caring for the elderly with chronic illnesses. Here are some considerations for social workers in caring for the elderly with chronic illnesses:

1. Understanding the individual's interaction with their physical and social environment.
2. Understanding the impact of changes in the physical and cognitive abilities of the elderly on how they interact with their surroundings.
3. Conducting a careful assessment of the physical and cognitive changes in the elderly.
4. Adapting the social and physical environment to support the well-being of the elderly.
5. Understanding the diverse needs and demands of elderly care.
6. Maintaining good communication with the elderly and their families.

7. Encouraging patient compliance with chronic disease therapy.

By taking these factors into account, social workers can provide better care and ensure the well-being of the elderly, as explained in Nuriana, D., et al. (2019) and Zastrow, C., & Hessenauer, S. L. (2022). Furthermore, Sarie, F., Untarti, et al. (2023) emphasize that with a deep understanding of the ecological aspects, social workers can provide more holistic care tailored to the needs of the elderly and help them face challenges more effectively.

Social work practices, especially in caring for the elderly with chronic illnesses, can apply the Stress Theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) as discussed by Amalia, N. R. (2019). The stress theory is highly relevant, particularly when dealing with issues of social isolation experienced by the elderly. Elderly individuals with chronic illnesses may experience stress due to feelings of isolation from their social environment. Social workers play a vital role in helping them cope with stress by providing the necessary emotional support, teaching effective coping strategies, and assisting in rebuilding social networks that can offer positive support throughout their treatment journey.

According to Pincus, A., & Minahan, A. (1973), the ecological systems model views individuals as part of a larger social environment and explains that the role of social workers is as change agents who work to enhance the well-being of individuals and communities by influencing the social environment. Minahan emphasizes the importance of interventions focused on social environmental change and collaboration with various stakeholders. His work also highlights the role of social workers in advocating for social change and policies that support the well-being of vulnerable groups. In line with this, research findings indicate that social workers in the care of elderly individuals with chronic illnesses provide education, psychosocial support, and coordinate health services. They provide an understanding of the disease, assist in managing stress and depression, and ensure coordinated care.

Social workers implement critical strategies in the care of elderly individuals facing chronic illnesses. They work collaboratively with healthcare teams to design comprehensive care plans. Additionally, social workers assist the elderly and their families in building a social support network involving the community and charitable organizations, ensuring the availability of necessary support. Furthermore, they provide education on technology use to the elderly, enabling them to monitor their health, access information, and communicate effectively with healthcare professionals. Through these strategies, social workers play a vital role in enhancing the quality of care and the well-being of the elderly with chronic illnesses.

D. CONCLUSION

The research results above identify various challenges in the care of the elderly with chronic illnesses that social workers face. These challenges include medical complexity, social isolation, physical mobility limitations, and economic issues. To address these challenges, social workers need to have a medical understanding,

promote social interactions, provide home healthcare services, and assist in patient financial planning.

In addressing these challenges, social workers can apply concepts from Human Ecology Theory and Lazarus and Folkman's Stress Theory. Social workers act as change agents working to enhance the well-being of the elderly by influencing their social environment. They also provide the necessary emotional support and education to cope with stress and feelings of isolation. Furthermore, social work practices focus on collaboration with medical care teams and an integrated approach in designing comprehensive care. Social workers not only play a role in direct patient care but also in building effective collaborations with other stakeholders. Thus, social workers have a crucial role in improving the quality of care for the elderly with chronic illnesses by understanding and effectively addressing these challenges.

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