



AASW

.....
**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

***Scope of Social Work Practice
Social Work in Health***

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Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) **Scope of Social Work Practice in Health** document provides an overview of the role, scope, contribution and evidence base of social work practice in the health care field. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.¹ The social work profession operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural, physical and natural environments while recognising the impact of the economic, psychological, emotional, political, social, legal and environmental determinants on health and wellbeing.

With this in mind, the aim of this document is to highlight in a concise, accessible and informative manner the crucial role and services that social workers provide and that employers and clients can expect.

The social work profession

The social work profession is committed to maximising the wellbeing of individuals and society. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing is underpinned by socially inclusive communities that emphasise **principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights**, including the right to freedom from intimidation and exclusion.

Drawing on theories of social work, social sciences, psychology, humanities and Indigenous knowledge, social workers focus on the interface between the individual and the environment and recognise the impact of social, economic and cultural factors on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing; and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that may impact on wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social work is a **tertiary-qualified profession** recognised nationally and internationally. The AASW is the key professional body representing social workers in Australia and is responsible for the accreditation of social work university programs. The academic qualifications that are accredited by the AASW include: a Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Social Work with Honours, or a Social Work Qualifying Master's degree. The curriculum provides entry-level professional social work education addressing education, knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across the diverse range of practice settings, fields of practice and methods of social work practice, and includes an extensive period of field education.

Graduates of AASW-accredited social work courses are eligible for membership of the AASW.

Click [here](#) for a full list of AASW accredited courses.



¹ WHO (1948) *Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, New York

Role of social work in health

A social worker's role in the health field is to enhance the person's social and emotional functioning through targeted interventions and the mobilisation of services and supports. Social workers intervene in the context of a person's social environments and relationships, recognising the impact of the socioeconomic, cultural, psychological and political determinants on health and overall wellbeing. In their commitment to human rights and social justice, social workers advocate for the rights of clients, against discrimination, reduced opportunities and abuse.

With their focus on holistic care and the ability to consider the complexity involved from an ethical, legal, psychosocial perspective, social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution in providing appropriate services to meet the multidimensional needs of individuals, families and groups.

Professional **social workers are present throughout the health field across a wide range of settings** including:

- Hospitals
- Community health
- Primary health networks
- Mental health services
- All levels of government
- Homelessness services
- Refugee services
- Indigenous services
- Policy and program development
- Management and governance
- Asylum seeker and migrant services
- Alcohol and drug services

Social workers are regularly involved when a person's health is impacted by complex social, psychological, family and institutional dynamics. Furthermore, in their commitment to self-determination, social workers ensure that individuals within the health care system have access to information and are able to make decisions concerning their health and wellbeing.

Scope of practice of health social work

Social workers draw on a broad range of theories, knowledge, research and skills to ensure comprehensive and holistic analysis of the client's situation. Social workers' assessments range from targeted and brief specific-needs analyses through to comprehensive psychosocial and risk assessments of the full range of social and psychological needs, strengths and stressors. These assessments underpin needs-based interventions that address the social and emotional issues that are impacting on the individual and family members' health and wellbeing.

The **scope of practice in health social work** includes:

- Bereavement, grief and loss support work in order to improve coping and psychosocial outcomes, in relation to chronic sorrow, disability, suicide, sudden and traumatic death
- Risk assessment and therapeutic interventions in relation to child abuse and neglect, domestic and family violence, intimate partner violence, elder abuse, and exploitation
- Socio-legal issues and ethical decision making, for example: advanced health directives; enduring power of attorneys; end-of-life decision making; cessation of medical procedures and organ donation
- Comprehensive discharge planning particularly where there are complex psychosocial issues
- Therapeutic intervention in relation to a range of chronic health conditions including: mental health, trauma, adjustment to diagnosis and disability
- Family intervention and support, which includes family therapy and family case conferencing

- Leadership in case management and in the coordination of services both within and external to the health care service
- Group work: working with groups and communities to provide health information and education on a wide range of biopsychosocial factors that impact on wellbeing
- Undertaking a range of statutory functions relevant to local legislative requirements, this may include: child protection; mental health services and vulnerable adults
- Advocacy in relation to health inequalities to improve health outcomes for individuals, families, groups and populations in relation to social issues that may affect the health outcome
- Psychoeducation for patients and their families in a range of health care settings
- Crisis intervention, which can include psychosocial services provided to emergency departments and sudden traumatic injury or death
- Working with older people, including psychogeriatric issues
- Policy development and research.

Social workers **provide specialist clinical expertise** in addressing the psychosocial aspects of:

- Child abuse and neglect, elder abuse and domestic and family violence
- Child, youth and adult mental health
- Oncology and palliative care
- Issues of chronic sorrow associated with grief, loss and adjustment to diagnosis and disability
- Trauma across the age spectrum, which contributes to better outcomes for individuals and communities, for example: working with patients with brain injury.

Contribution of social work

Social workers are regularly involved with individuals and families experiencing complex social, psychological, family and institutional dynamics. Social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution in providing appropriate and targeted services and therefore have a clear role in the provision of effective health care services.

Social workers contribute at an organisational level by:

- Reducing health service demand by identifying and removing barriers that may be limiting effective engagement with services
- Reducing inappropriate health service demand through comprehensive psychosocial assessments and intervention including linkages and referrals to community based services
- Preventing multiple readmissions through rigorous discharge planning and by: addressing critical psychosocial determinants; the establishment of strong, supportive familial and community networks and access to appropriate resources
- Providing professional development for other health professionals on psychosocial issues relevant to recovery
- Managing teams and or services in a vast range of health settings. Social workers employed in management positions bring a unique perspective to health care
- Contributing to investment and future planning in health service delivery by innovative social work practices, programs and research activities, particularly with vulnerable populations, using new technologies and diverse strategic and community partnerships.

Conclusion

Social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution in providing appropriate and targeted services to meet the complex needs of patients, families and communities within the health care field. Most importantly social workers prevent or minimise the psychosocial consequences of illness and disability leading to improved health outcomes. Accordingly, the profession of social work has a clear role in the continuum of health care services.

Evidence informing practice

Key journals:

Australian Social Work (Taylor & Francis)
British Journal of Social Work (Oxford)
Health & Social Work (Oxford)
Health and Social Care in the Community
(Wiley-Blackwell)
International Social Work (Sage)
Journal of Social Work (Sage)
Research on Social Work Practice (Sage)
Social Work in Health Care (Taylor & Francis)

Key Articles/Chapters:

Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2014). *Queensland Branch Position Paper on the Role of Social Work in Health Care*, Canberra: AASW.

Auerbach, C. & Mason, S. (2010). The value of the presence of social work in emergency departments, *Social Work in Health Care*, 49(4), 314-326.

Auerbach, C., Mason, S. & Laporte, H. (2007). Evidence that supports the value of social work in hospitals, *Social Work in Health Care*, 44(4), 17-32.

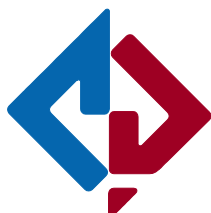
Galati, M., Wong, H., Morra, D., & Wu, R. (2011). An evidence-based case for the value of social workers in efficient hospital discharge, *The Health Care Manager*, 30(3), 242-246.

Lechman, C. & Duder, S. (2009). Hospital length of stay: Social work services as an important factor, *Social Work in Health Care*, 48(5), 495-504.

Mason, S. & Auerbach, C. (2009). Factors related to admissions to a psychiatry unit from a medical emergency room: The role of social work', *Social Work in Mental Health*, 7(5), 429-441.

Pockett, R. & Beddoe, E. (2015). Social work in health care: An international perspective, *International Social Work*, DOI: 10.1177/0020872814562479.

Schroepfer, T. (2011). Oncology social work in palliative care, *Current Problems in Cancer*, 35(6), 357-364.



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