

Scope of Social Work Practice Hospitals



AASW

Australian Association
of Social Workers

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Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) Scope of Social Work Practice - Hospitals document provides an overview of the scope and contribution of social work practice in hospitals. 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 clients and employers can expect.

The social work profession

The social work profession is committed to maximising the wellbeing of individuals, families, groups, communities 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.

Drawing on theories of social work, social sciences, psychology, humanities and Indigenous knowledge, the social work profession operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural, physical and natural environments. Through casework, assessments, counselling, family work, advocacy, research, policy and community work, social workers operate from a person-in-environment perspective providing interventions that address issues at both the personal and social level.

Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing; and addressing any external issues that may be negatively affecting it, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. The Australian Association of Social Workers (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.

Role of hospital social workers

Hospital social workers provide direct services to patients and their families/carers (including significant others) aiming to minimise the negative impacts of illness and hospitalisation. A hospital social worker's role is to enhance social and emotional functioning through targeted interventions and the mobilisation of services and supports.

Social workers intervene in the context of a patient's social environments and relationships, recognising the effects of the psychological, familial, social, economic and cultural determinants on health and wellbeing. In their commitment to human rights and social justice, social workers advocate for the rights of patients and their families/carers, against discrimination, exclusion and abuse they can sometimes experience.

With their focus on patient-centred care and the ability to consider the complexity involved from a psychosocial perspective, social workers offer a unique contribution to the hospital system in providing services to meet the multidimensional needs of patients and their families/carers.

Professional social workers are employed in a wide range of hospital settings including public and private, both acute and subacute, across metropolitan, regional and rural areas. They work with children, adults, families and communities across a wide range of units and speciality areas including, but not limited to:

- Emergency departments
- Intensive care, including neonatal
- Paediatrics
- Obstetrics
- Oncology
- Renal
- Neurology

- Trauma
- Chronic health conditions
- Cardiac
- Burns
- Geriatric services
- Psychiatric and mental health
- Sexual assault and child abuse
- Rehabilitation
- Transplantation
- Drug and alcohol services
- Palliative care

Scope of practice of hospital social work

Social workers draw on a broad range of skills, knowledge and research to ensure comprehensive assessment, interventions and a holistic analysis of the patient's situation. Social work 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 and evidence-informed interventions that address the social and emotional issues that are impacting on the patient and their family/carer's health, wellbeing, adjustment and recovery.

Social workers are essential members of multidisciplinary hospital teams. Working with doctors, nurses, and other allied health professionals, social workers can educate healthcare teams to the social and emotional aspects and impacts of a patient's condition. This information can significantly influence the patient's care plan to be more reflective of their needs.

The scope of practice in hospital social work includes:

- Assessment
 - Comprehensive psychosocial assessments of patients, including families, carers and significant others (see [Scope of Practice for Psychosocial Assessment](#))
 - Risk assessments, and comprehensive interventions, for child abuse and neglect, family violence, intimate partner violence, elder abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation

- Capacity, functioning and development assessment, including support and participation requirements, housing and accommodation
- The utilisation of evidence informed screening tools for a range of issues
- Counselling, mediation and therapeutic interventions
 - Counselling and targeted therapeutic interventions aimed at helping patients/families/carers adjust to hospital admission
 - Counselling and targeted therapeutic interventions in order to address adjustment to diagnosis, trauma, possible role changes, emotional/social responses to illness and treatment
 - Grief, loss and bereavement support through counselling and therapeutic interventions
 - Comprehensive interventions in relation to chronic health conditions (with a particular focus on self-management issues, impact on health outcomes and where comorbid psychosocial complexities exist)
 - Mediation and conflict resolution
 - Carer support, in relation to self-care, health and wellbeing
 - Group work and support programs including psycho-education
 - Developing culturally appropriate therapeutic interventions
- Crisis interventions
 - Supporting vulnerable/people in crisis to navigate and communicate their needs/wishes within the hospital system
 - Acute services provided to emergency departments due to traumas resulting in sudden traumatic injury or death and major crises (including natural disasters)
- Advocacy
 - Supporting individuals, families and carers to be self-advocates, or advocating on their behalf
 - Advocating for change on an organisational and systemic level
- Case management, service coordination and multidisciplinary work
 - Case management and the coordination of services both within and external to the healthcare service
 - Referrals to other services
 - Ensuring communication and understanding about post-hospital care among patient, family, carer and healthcare team members
 - Educating hospital staff on patient psychosocial context and needs
 - Promoting communication and collaboration among healthcare team members

- Coordinating patient discharge and continuity of care planning
- Undertaking a range of statutory functions relevant to local legislative requirements, this may include: child protection; mental health services; vulnerable adults; power of attorney and public trustee or guardianship and administration
- Education, resourcing and practical assistance
 - Resourcing and support in accessing appropriate information and financial assistance
 - Providing patient/family/carer education on the levels of health care, roles of healthcare team members, assisting patients and families/carers in communicating with members of healthcare teams, understanding medical information and advance care planning
- Policy, program design and research
 - Guiding and supporting the implementation of 'patient centred' models of care at an organisational level
 - Developing policy, design and evaluation of programs
 - Engaging in research and publishing peer reviewed journals
- Social workers provide specialist clinical expertise in addressing the psychosocial aspects of:
 - Child abuse and neglect, domestic and family violence, intimate partner violence, sexual abuse, elder abuse, and exploitation
 - Bereavement, grief and loss support work in order to improve coping mechanisms and psychosocial outcomes, in relation to depression, disability, suicide, sudden and traumatic death
 - Socio-legal issues and ethical decision making, for example: advance care planning, enduring power of attorneys, end-of-life decision making and planning, cessation of medical interventions and organ donation
 - Chronic health conditions including: mental health, trauma, adjustment to diagnosis and disability
 - Family interventions and support in relation to complex psychosocial issues, which includes family therapy and family case conferencing
 - Developing culturally responsive and inclusive interventions, including the delivery of culturally sensitive, secure and safe practices in coordination with other professionals including interpreters, Indigenous liaison officers and Aboriginal health workers.

Contribution of hospital social work

Hospital social workers are regularly involved with patients and families/carers experiencing complex social, psychological, family and institutional dynamics. In their commitment to self-determination and respect, hospital social workers ensure that patients, and their families/carers, have access to information and are able to make informed decisions concerning their health and wellbeing.

Social workers contribute at an organisational level by:

- Providing interventions that acknowledge the full range of biopsychosocial impacts of illness and hospitalisation
- Developing culturally appropriate models of service delivery
- 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 readmissions through rigorous discharge planning and by addressing critical psychosocial determinants including the establishment of strong, supportive familial and community networks and access to appropriate resources
- Leadership when working in multidisciplinary team around response planning for issues of risk, abuse and trauma
- Conducting comprehensive and culturally appropriate psychosocial assessments that greatly inform the decision making of other professionals and the multidisciplinary health team
- Provision of critical incident/single session debriefing
- Providing professional development for other health professionals on psychosocial issues relevant to recovery
- Contributing to future planning in health service delivery by innovative social work practices, programs and research activities

Conclusion

Social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution in providing appropriate and targeted services to meet the complex psychosocial needs of patients, their family and carers in hospitals. Hospital social workers provide direct services aiming to minimise the impacts of illness and hospitalisation when a person's health is impacted by complex social, psychological, family and institutional dynamics.

Accordingly, the profession of social work has a clear role in the continuum of hospital services.



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