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CHALLENGES FACED BY SOCIAL WORKERS IN MENTAL HEALTH FACILITIES IN ENUGU STATE: A STUDY OF ENUGU STATE PSYCHIATRIC TEACHING HOSPITAL EMENE, ENUGU AND FEDERAL NEUROPSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL NEW HAVEN, ENUGU

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Abstract

Mental health rehabilitation facilities are special facilities that allow managing the issue of mental health disorders. Social workers in such places offer bio-psychosocial supports, assess and intervene on patients and their families. This study was carried out at the Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital, New Haven, and the Enugu State Psychiatric Teaching Hospital, Emene, Enugu which aimed at investigating the problems encountered by social workers in the mental health institutions of Enugu State. A cross-sectional study design coupled with purposive sampling that involved in-depth semi structured interviews of ten participants was conducted. The results documented various obstacles such as low cultural awareness of the profession, poor infrastructure, inadequate funding from the government, burnout, fatigue, and poor understanding of the people about the profession of social work. As a solution to these problems, the study proposed ongoing training and education of social workers so that they could develop empathy and become non-judgmental. It also highlighted on the importance of effective communication, inter-professional collaboration, cultural competence, clear boundaries, and reflective practice. The study further recommended that the government and other relevant bodies must do something to meet these challenges so as to improve social work practice and mental health service delivery in Enugu State.

Keywords: Mental Rehabilitation, Social Work Practice, Challenges, Burn-Out, Enugu Inter-Professional Collaboration, Government Funding, Enugu State.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mental ill-health, also classified as mental challenge is characterized by symptoms and disorders such as mental health strain, temporary and permanent stress symptoms (Singh, 2021). Mental well-being plays an important role in the well-being of the society and individuals. Mental ill-health is also associated with neurological and substance use disorders with several problems caused by mental disorders. Mental and neurological diseases are the cause of 13 percent of the overall Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) lost to any disease and injury in the world. In 2020, neuropsychiatric conditions contributed as much as 15 percent of the world disability level with the component of mental health depression contributing 5.7 percent of the DALYs. So, its prevention and encouragement of mental health

should occur at the level of policy, legislation, and distribution of resources World Health Organization [WHO], 2022).

Mental health as a state of well-being in which the individual understands his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, fruitfully and able to make a contribution to his or her community. The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships, empowerment and liberation of people to enhance individuals' wellbeing, utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environment, principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (Auerbach, et al., 2018). Social work skills and interventions can be used in practice to enhance effectiveness and helps bring about positive outcomes from human being (Tarsh, 2025).

Mental health is the capacity of the individual, the group and the environment to interact with one another in ways that promote subjective wellbeing, the optimal development and use of process and contribute to their well-being. The care provided by social workers in mental health facilities/hospitals to clients/patients are multifaceted (Hailu, 2020). Social workers are also essential members of interdisciplinary hospital teams. Working together with doctors, nurses, and other allied health professionals, social workers sensitize other health care providers to the social and emotional aspects of a patient's illness (Dane, & Chachkes, 2001). Social workers in mental health facilities use case management skills to help patients and their families address and resolve the social, financial and psychological problems related to their health condition (Barber, et al., 2016). It is the social worker's responsibility to reserve their profession and undeniable contribution in hospitals and health care settings.

Mental health and neurological disorders account for a significant share of the global burden of disease. According to WHO, these conditions are responsible for 13% of the total DALY's, and by 2020, neuropsychiatric disorders were projected to account for 15% of global disability, with unipolar depression leading the list (WHO, 2022). Bhardwaj (2020), also emphasized that mental illnesses contribute to 32.4% of the years lived with disability and 13% of all DALYs worldwide. Despite this burden, mental health facilities remain insufficient, particularly in developing countries, where mental health services have less population coverage than in developed nations. Historically, social workers have played a crucial role in addressing these mental health challenges, particularly from the early 20th century when they were tasked with providing both social and psychological support to patients in psychiatric institutions.

Social work as a profession is founded on principles of human rights, social justice, empowerment, and the resolution of human problems (Mapp et. al 2019). It addresses the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments using theoretical frameworks rooted in human behavior and social systems. The formalization of hospital social work began in 1918 with the establishment of the American Association of Hospital Social Workers, which aimed to improve training and foster collaboration between educational institutions and practitioners (Reisch, 2012). Social workers today engage in direct practice, crisis intervention, community organization, research, and policy advocacy, all aimed at enhancing the quality of life and wellbeing of individuals, especially those affected by poverty, disability, illness, and social exclusion. Approximately 97% of social workers are

professionally trained, emphasizing the significance of the profession in health and mental care systems.

However, despite their critical role, social workers in healthcare especially in mental health settings face numerous challenges. As Katupao, (2023) pointed out, these professionals often manage emotionally intense and delicate situations, which require them to balance patient advocacy with institutional expectations. Many healthcare systems do not fully recognize the significance of social work, leading to their exclusion from direct medical decisions. As a result, social workers must struggle to assert their professional relevance in environments that are increasingly clinical and medically oriented. Their values and goals often clash with hospital policies and cultures that prioritize efficiency and cost reduction over holistic care.

The evolution of managed care services has compounded these challenges. Health system reforms aimed at reducing costs have negatively impacted the autonomy and visibility of social workers in hospital settings. Reports from the National Association of Social Workers [NASW], (2023) reveals that hospital social workers are overwhelmed by increasing caseloads, administrative tasks, and limited resources. In many instances, social work departments have been downsized or dismantled altogether. Their tasks are frequently delegated to nurses, paraprofessionals, or volunteers, which diminishes the quality of psychosocial services. Furthermore, in some hospitals, leadership roles in social work departments are assigned to individuals without a background in social work, undermining professional supervision and ethics.

Ramaswamy et. al (2024) highlighted further issues in the marginalization of hospital social workers. One key concern is that social workers are not involved in the medical treatment process, which reinforces the perception of their role as secondary. Additionally, healthcare institutions often reduce patient stay durations as part of cost-containment strategies, limiting the time social workers have to perform comprehensive assessments and interventions. This shift pushes them into roles focused primarily on discharge planning, thus weakening their ability to provide therapeutic and advocacy services. The loss of control over their professional functions and the lack of clear role definition continue to challenge social workers' effectiveness and identity in healthcare settings.

Despite these challenges, social workers remain vital in bridging the gap between clinical care and community-based support. Their unique understanding of the social, environmental, and emotional aspects of patient care equips them to address issues such as mental health crises, substance abuse, chronic illness, and access to long-term support. Their holistic approach, known as the "person-in-environment" perspective, enables them to treat patients in the context of their broader life circumstances. Social workers are not only trained in crisis management and counseling but also in cultural competence, empathy, and ethical decision-making. Most hold at least a bachelor's degree in social work, and many possess advanced degrees and licensure. Their ongoing commitment to social justice and the well-being of vulnerable populations underscores their indispensable role in delivering comprehensive and compassionate health care.

Social work as a profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships, empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments through using theories of human behavior and social systems. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work". The main objectives of Social Work are problem-solving, empowerment and social change where people interact with their environments (Tarsh, 2025). Social work is a profession that focuses on improving the health and social well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities. Social Workers believe in the rights and dignity of all individuals and to the achievement of social justice. Social workers are considered as educators, field instructors and trainers. They provide instruction only within their areas of knowledge and competence and should provide instruction based on the most current information and knowledge available in the profession (NASW, 2023).

Since social workers make a great effort for the well-functioning of the society, it is very essential for the society to understand their roles especially in the mental health setting (Judd & Sheffield, 2010). There have been very few studies conducted in the areas of mental health disorder in Enugu. This research tried to focus on the challenges faced by of social workers in the mental health hospitals in Enugu. The interest emanated from the field work practice for the courses of practicum I and II in these mental health hospitals. More so, the field work practice in mental health hospitals for the course practicum motivated this research.

2.0 Theoretical framework

This study adopted the social system theory and role theory as it's framework of analysis**.** Systems theory was propounded by Bronfenbrenner in (1979). Systems theory emphasizes that individuals (including social workers) operate within complex, interconnected systems (e.g., organizational, societal, family, and policy environments). Challenges arise when there is dysfunction or lack of support at any level of the system (Adu & Oudshoorn, 2020). This theory explains how institutional policies, inadequate resources, family dynamics, or community stigma can affect the effectiveness of social workers in mental health settings. It also aids in understanding how systemic failures (e.g., poor funding, inter-agency collaboration and weak policies) influence their performance. Role theory explains how individuals behave based on the expectations of the roles they occupy. This theory was propounded by George Herbert Mead an American philosopher and Ralph Linton asocial psychologist in the 1930s. They stated that when role expectations are unclear, conflicting, or overloaded, it results in role strain or role conflict. This theory helps analyze how social workers struggle with unclear job descriptions, multiple responsibilities, ethical dilemmas, and lack of role recognition in psychiatric facilities. It explains issues like burnout, job dissatisfaction, or professional identity crisis (Teater, 2024).

3.0 METHOD

This study employed a cross-sectional research design to examine the roles and challenges faced by social workers in mental health hospitals. The design allowed for the collection of data from a specific population at one point in time, making it suitable for exploring current realities and practices within the hospitals. The researchers used purposive sampling, a non-probability technique where participants are selected based on the researcher's judgment. This

method ensured that only knowledgeable and experienced social workers who could provide rich insights were included in the study.

The research was conducted in two key mental health facilities in Enugu State: The Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital, Enugu, and the Enugu State Psychiatric Teaching Hospital, Emene. These institutions were selected because of their relevance in providing mental health services and employing professional social workers. The Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital, established in 1962, includes various departments such as clinical social work, nursing, and outpatient care, and caters to mentally ill patients in a therapeutic environment. The Enugu State Psychiatric Teaching Hospital, established in 1980, was dedicated to supporting individuals with both mental health needs and physical disabilities. Social workers in both institutions provide a range of rehabilitative services aimed at helping patients regain independence and improve their quality of life.

The sample consisted of ten respondents five social workers from each hospital. Purposive sampling was applied to identify participants with relevant experience. Data collection was qualitative in nature, utilizing in-depth interviews to gather detailed and meaningful responses. The interview process included two parts: the first part focused on demographic data, while the second involved open-ended questions related to the participants' professional roles and the challenges they face. Participants were notified in advance about the time, date, venue, and purpose of the interview, allowing them to prepare. Each interview was conducted individually, and the researchers moderated the sessions using both a recording device and writing materials. Transcriptions of the interviews were done afterward.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data, starting during the data collection process. This method allowed for the identification of patterns and themes across the interviews. The data were grouped into three major categories: the roles of social workers in mental health hospitals, the challenges they encounter, and possible solutions to these challenges. The thematic approach was chosen for its flexibility and ability to produce rich and detailed interpretations. The manual analysis ensured that data were thoroughly reviewed and organized based on their relevance and similarity, allowing the researchers to draw meaningful conclusions from the participants' experiences.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study to ensure participants' rights, dignity, and privacy were upheld. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality. Their participation was voluntary, and they were assured that any identifying information would be kept confidential and used strictly for research purposes. By adhering to ethical standards outlined by Polit and Beck (2008) the research maintained a high level of professionalism and integrity throughout its implementation.

4.0 Results and Discussion

In this qualitative study, data were gathered through face-to-face in-depth interview with a total of 10 participants and semi-structured interview among 5 social workers at Enugu state Psychiatric Teaching hospital Emene and 5 social workers from federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital Enugu state. The ages of the participants ranges between 20 to 69 years old. The interviews were facilitated through the use of voice recorder and writing materials and the

data were further categorized and analyzed until a set of themes are derived. The participants were interviewed in their offices. Below is the profile of the participants.

4.1 TABLE 1.0

Participants	Gender	Age	Religion	Occupation	Qualification
P1	M	50-59	Christianity	S/W	Ph.D
P2	F	30-39	Christianity	S/W	B.Sc.
P3	M	30-39	Christianity	S/W	B.Sc.
P4	M	40-49	Christianity	S/W	Ph.D
P5	F	30-39	Christianity	S/W	Ph.D
P6	F	30-39	Christianity	S/W	Ph.D
P7	F	40-49	Christianity	S/W	Ph.D
P8	F	50-59	Christianity	S/W	Ph.D
P9	F	40-49	Christianity	S/W	B.Sc.
P10	M	50-59	Christianity	S/W	Ph.D

4.2 Theme one: The roles and responsibilities of social workers in mental health facilities

The result shows how different participants responded to the roles and responsibilities of social workers in mental health hospitals.

P1: Responded that social workers provide psychosocial therapy/support counseling to the patients.

P2: Responded that social workers provide essential case management and direct services to the patients.

P3: Responded that social workers provide skills, training, moral and behavioral development for the patients.

P4: Responded that social workers provide comprehensive assessments for patients' social and environmental conditions.

P5: Responded that social workers provide advocate for mental health Patients and also identify Factors that are causing Maladjustment.

P6: Responded that social workers assist Patients and their families to accept the diagnosis and encourage them.

P7: The roles and responsibilities of social workers act as a facilitator to their patients by helping to bring about an outcome such as learning and communication.

P8: Responded that social workers provide social workers provide social work input and knowledge and to apply industrial social work.

P9: Responded that social workers build rapport and relationship so that they can identify individuals, group or communities who need mental health support.

P10: Responded that social workers help the patients in achieving their greatest levels of independence in their everyday functioning.

Participants reported that social workers in mental health settings engage in case management, psychosocial assessment, family advocacy, skills training, and the promotion of patient independence. Recent scholarship confirms these functions as core to contemporary practice. Levin et al. (2022) describe hospital-based social workers as key providers of assessment, crisis intervention, and care ordination aimed at fostering patient self-determination. Similarly, Acker and Anastas (2021) emphasize that advocacy for families and

linkage with community resources remain central to effective mental-health care. These studies corroborate the multifaceted professional roles identified in the present research.

4.3 Theme two: The challenges faced by social workers in mental health facilities

The result below shows how different participant responded to the challenges of social workers in mental health hospitals.

P1: Responded that lack of awareness about social work discipline as an interdisciplinary field is one of the challenges we encounter in the mental hospitals.

P2: Responded that lack of office facilities is one of the challenges we face by sharing one office with other staff.

P3: Responded that lack of cooperation from patient relations is another challenge we face.

P4: Responded that having a difficult relationship with the administrative of the hospital is also the challenges we face.

P5: Responded that difficulty in communication with patients is another challenge.

P6: Responded that burnout is also the challenges we face by working so long with inadequate self-care support.

P7: Responded that irregular work hours, such as night shifts or rotating schedule is another challenge, we face in hospital settings.

P8: Responded that fatigue, emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion from the exposure of difficulties Patient is also challenges we face.

P9: Responded that cultural differences are also the challenge we encounter.

P10: Responded that meeting with the aggressive Patients is another challenge we have.

Participants highlighted low public awareness of the profession, inadequate facilities, strained inter-professional communication, burnout, cultural barriers, and the need to manage aggressive patients. Such obstacles are widely documented in recent literature. Mok et al. (2021) found that mental-health social workers internationally continue to experience role ambiguity and limited professional recognition. Resource shortages are echoed in the World Health Organization's (2021) report on persistent gaps in mental-health infrastructure. Inter-professional tension and weak communication protocols remain barriers to effective teamwork (Reeves & Fletcher, 2023). Burnout and compassion fatigue, driven by high workloads and emotional demands, have been linked to diminished service quality (Gibbs et al., 2022). Cultural differences in illness perceptions continue to impede engagement with diverse clients (Williams et al., 2020). These findings align closely with the challenges reported by study participants.

4.3 Theme three: The possible solutions for these challenges faced by social workers in mental health facilities

The result shows the possible solutions proffered by the participants to the challenges faced by social workers in mental health facilities

P1: Responded that the solution for these challenges is by continuous education and training of social workers

P2: Responded that the solution for these challenges is by developing empathy and a non-judgmental attitude for patients.

P3: Responded that the solution for these challenges is by providing effective communication skills among the health professionals and Patients.

P4: Responded that the solution to these challenges is by collaborating with other professionals in the hospital settings.

P5: Responded that the solution to these challenges is by understanding the diverse cultural backgrounds of patients.
P6: Responded that the solution to these challenges by maintaining boundaries and self-awareness.
P7: Responded that the solution to these challenges to create awareness in the society and advocacy about social work profession.
P8: Responded that the solution to these challenges is to cultivate a positive mindset and outlook.
P9: Responded that the solution to these challenges is by celebrating and appreciating the achievements of the patients when they reach their milestones.
P10: The possible solution to these challenges is by learning and sharing knowledge and experience with others like professional colleagues.
Respondents opined that continuous professional education, improved communication and collaboration, cultural competence, maintenance of professional boundaries, and public advocacy. Recent evidence supports these strategies. Structured professional development and reflective supervision have been shown to reduce burnout and improve outcomes (Laird et al., 2022). Inter-professional education enhances collaboration and patient safety (Mann et al., 2021). Cultural-competence training strengthens therapeutic alliances and adherence (Hook et al., 2020). Organizational initiatives that address workload and provide peer support lower turnover and enhance well-being (Gibbs et al., 2022). Finally, national professional bodies advocate for broad public-awareness campaigns to elevate the profile of social work in mental health (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2023).

5.0 Conclusion

Social workers provide a significant contribution to the field of health by maintaining a dual focus on both the individual and family. They are regularly involved with individuals and families experiencing complex social, psychological, family and institutional dynamics. Besides, social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution in providing appropriate and targeted services. Therefore, they have a clear role in the provision of effective mental health services. Enugu is one of the developing states in the world in which researchers can do more research on mental health. This is due to its hindering factors related to socioeconomic growth level and limited numbers of professional in the country. In conclusion, it is up to the government authorities, mental health facilities management, policy makers as well as the social work professional associations to put in mind the challenges faced by social workers in mental health hospitals and work towards addressing the situation for improved service delivery.

5.1 Recommendations

From the above findings and conclusion, the researchers recommended the following:

1. Mental health hospitals should give attention to social workers and encourage them to conduct assessment and research on the patient's psychosocial status and social workers should be provided with the necessary office facilities.
2. The professionals of mental health hospitals should have to take various training which facilitate collaboration and team work spirit in the hospitals and to clearly understand the challenges of social workers in the health settings. For mental health social work is the most important discipline to implement in the mental health services.

3. System must be created and empowered starting from minister of health that is the Federal level to the lower health center which is the local authorities as well as the hospital management including the professional social work association (C-ISOWN, AMSOWN, NASOW) to carry out their assigned responsibilities.
4. Schools offering social work programmes should to play a great role in implementing and promoting social work in health care settings.
5. Focus should be given to the training part and to place competent social work professionals within each health facilities, improving patient facilities in the hospital, the mentally ill patients who are living in the hospital need appropriate services to recover and social workers play a great role in the rehabilitation of mental health illness.

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