

REVIEW ARTICLE

Paradigm Shifting From Bio-Medical to Bio-Psycho-Social and Role of Medical Social Work

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ABSTRACT

The health miseries emerged after the horrific incident of Second World War challenged the bio-medical model dominating the healthcare perceptions during the 19th century. The healthcare interventions in post war years have had to change toward a new idea, the social perspective of health. In 1977, Engel introduced a new approach “bio-psycho-social” (BPS) which emphasized that merely bio-medical intervention by ignoring the psycho-social determinants cannot be helpful in achieving absolute recovery. Although this paradigm shift in healthcare was widely acknowledged but the application of the approach is limited. In the context, the role of Medical Social Work, a profession focused on the reduction of the psycho-social and environmental determinants of health for absolute recovery, is considerable. This review study concludes that the interventions of Social work profession with its unique attributes such as breadth, holistic care and believe in absolute rehabilitation, can make the health system more responsive.

Keywords: Healthcare, determinants, Medical Social Work, Social, Psychological

INTRODUCTION

The complex and multifold system of health has always been of keen interest to the researchers and policy makers to uncover and implement the innovative approaches to make the health indicators better. The perceptions and ideas regarding health remained changing gradually with the development of knowledge and understanding about the profession. History reveals that by the end of 15th century, people had no concern with the science but their life merely depended upon the religious or sacred places such as temples, mosques, church; and the human society was completely under control of religious thoughts and practices. No source of knowledge other than divine books was acceptable. It was believed that nature existed as it because of God's will and tempering nature was a sin. The health subject was also taken within the same paradigm and disease was seen solely as curse of God. Good or bad health was believed as reward or punishment by the God for good or bad deeds. The only method for treatment or curing the illness was pleasing the God.¹ Then in 16th and 17th centuries, the European society experienced some evolutionary changes which afterward influenced rest of the world. A French philosopher, *Rene Descartes* (1596–1650), famous as the founder of modern philosophy, has been credited for the development of innovative contemporary ideas in healthcare specifically.² This man was the pioneer to put forward the notion that the mind and body are not alike but two separate spheres. He proposed that the body could be considered as physical while the mind as spiritual world. The failure or malfunction in physical body is called disease and only a qualified person having technical knowledge can mend it.¹ This idea primarily led to the development of innovative medical supposition known as biomedicine.

Emergence of Bio-medical model in health: The bio-medical model confined the health merely to the non-existence of any physical disorder in the body and the treatment was considered as a technical and scientific intervention to fix the body fault. Medication, as per this approach was no more a healing art. The model considered human body as a multifaceted organic system and when it involved any dysfunction, a competent health physician can fix that. This model disconnected mind (*psych*) from body (*soma*) and the psycho-social and cultural conditions of the diseased person was entirely disregarded.³ During the 19th century, the Bio-medical approach was completely overruling the healthcare field which changed all medical care perceptions fundamentally.¹ By the end of 19th century, the development and esteem of medicine as a technical knowledge or science advanced progressively. Science, through major discoveries and innovative inventions made people expectant that all their problems will now be resolved by the science. Nonetheless, the horrific incident of Second World War shattered all the dreams of the world. In particular, after the act of bombing on Hiroshima purely result of scientific development, believe in science was flattered. They realized that scientific advancement will lead the world to the ruinous destruction rather a prosperous future.¹ Medicine science in the post war years, despite notching up considerable successes, began to dishearten the people. In consequence of numerous social changes during the era, the bio-medical model, after seeing its climax started to be condemned. The model has been criticized and challenged even by the medical professionals, for a long period. As a result, conceptions of health, disease and health care interventions have had to change toward a new idea, the Social perspective of health¹.

Development of social perspective of health: In 1948, a well refined and comprehensive health definition coined by the World Health Organization (WHO) called the attention

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towards addressing the psycho-social roots of the health equally with the biological so as to attain good health. Health was defined as "A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity"⁴ The definition, by combining together the biological and psychosocial aspects thus invited a social approach in healthcare associated to broad human rights commitments. Subsequently, some joint ventures of health professionals and community workers started in several countries which later on were converted into the renowned community based health programs focused on community participation and empowerment in decision making and endeavor for rights for better psycho-social, political and cultural determinants so as to attain improved public health.⁵

Hence, the prestige and reliability on innovative medical technologies and equipments was run down rapidly and dependence on technical health professionals was started to dwindle. A new debate to deputize the local community workers who could help the people in mitigating socio-cultural and psychological aspects to settle the health issues was started. Health education and medical awareness regarding prevailing socio-cultural determinants, adopting of recommended precautionary measures and curative strategies were focused largely.¹

Emergence of Bio-psycho-social model of health:

An American psychiatrist, George Libman Engel, presented a new approach known as bio-psycho-social (BPS) model of health in 1977.⁶ Engel having the rich experience of dealing the psychiatric patients make out that the assumption to consider the mind and body separate with no reliance on each other was the fundamental problem.⁷ He was of the view that bio-medical approach dominating over the health conceptions for a long period has finally become a medical dogma necessitating that all health issues either related to the body or mind, be conceptualized basically on physical, chemical and other biological methods. He also stated that no clear cut line between ailment and health has been drawn so far and only biological disorders are being considered and managed by ignoring the fact that psychological, social and environmental determinants also cause ailment and should be dealt.³ Engel further emphasized that psycho-social, cultural as well as emotional factors also affect the health along with the biological determinants. In his famous article "The Need for a New Medical Model: A Challenge for Biomedicine" Engel eloquently stated that:

*"...To provide a basis for understanding the determinants of disease and arriving at a rational treatments and patterns of health care, a medical model must also take into account the patient, the social context in which he lives and the complementary system devised by society to deal with the disruptive effects of illness, that is, the physician role and the health care system. This requires a bio-psycho-social mode..."*⁶

The BPS model deems mind and body as two separate systems working collectively. Health, by this model is a combination of biological, psychological, and social wellbeing not only the absence of biological disorder. Socio-cultural, psychological and economic conditions influence the health and illness significantly. Illness undermines ones personal as well as family stability and

healing potential. Only bio-medical intervention by ignoring the psycho-social counseling and support cannot be helpful in achieving absolute recovery. The model emphasized that multi-professional health interventions are required to deal with the multifold health phenomenon.⁸ The BPS approach is a perfect combination of science and humanism in health care practice. The approach, considering all associated determinants of health and illness supports the integration of biological, psychological and social determinants in the diagnosing, prevention and developing coping strategies. It does not trimming the worth of biological factors down, but extends a rather narrow approach⁹.

Application of bio-psycho-social approach in current medical practice:

An in-depth review of previous literature exposed that despite the widespread acknowledgement of the BPS model, its application in medical practice is still limited. One of the causes behind this may be the non-formulation of a well designed functional mechanism to apply the model.¹⁰ Moser and Stagnaro-Green indicated that although majority of the physicians admit the need and efficacy of the BPS model in dealing with the psycho-social determinants and believe that by addressing these factors can gain extraordinary consequences but many reported that it is quite hard to practice it due to vulnerability of physicians regarding effective training on the model and its application. They considered that addressing the bio-psycho-social determinates are often complex rather simple to be practiced.¹¹ Another study depicted that the physicians believe that psychosocial determinants affecting health can be very common and dominating over the illness and extensive knowledge and quality training in psychosocial domain is required to address these issues¹².

Maha et al confirmed that BPS approach has been ignored and disregarded by the medical practitioners. They enumerated multiple reasons in this regard. First, the physicians might assume that the application of BPS approach may increase their work burden. Secondly, they also might be unconvinced or have confusion in their minds regarding significance and efficacy or they may be incapable to implement. Third, there is a mistaken belief among physicians that BPS model being a patient-centered approach is a costly and time-consuming approach¹³.

According to the Kusnanto et al, the BPS model is criticized that its effective application requires an in-depth assessment of the social, psychological, emotional, behavioral, cultural and environmental determinants influencing the disease which is a hard-hitting task for a physician who is already overloaded with the clinical, managerial and other many official responsibilities.¹⁴ Truglio et al also raised query on the application of the model and considered that it is a prolonged, time-lapsing and expensive approach.¹⁵ It is also claimed that the holistic nature of the model makes it luxury and cosmetic which is not affordable for many healthcare systems of low and middle income countries¹⁶.

Role of Medical Social Work in bio-psycho-social perspective:

Healing and curing the ill person is always complex as the needs of a patient are often multifold rather simple. No profession or discipline has inclusive control over wisdom rather the close cooperation and interaction of related discipline is needed to ensure the high quality care for the community.¹⁷ Health as a discipline solely cannot be

effective in addressing the multidimensional requirements of the BPS approach. The multidisciplinary teams belong to the other related professions are required. The Social Work as a profession has a history of multidisciplinary teamwork and a dedication to the significance of early intervention, prevention and health improvements.¹⁸

With the shifting paradigm in healthcare from bio-medicine to the BPS, the role of MSW has become more significant. MSW with its holistic focus on psycho-social and physical wellbeing of the patients deals with the social components and other non medical factors of the disease. Social Work interventions exclusively focused on the reduction of the psycho-social and emotional determinants of the illness which are fundamental to the well being and health consequences.¹⁹ According to the "Australian Association of Social Workers" (2014):

*"...Social Work profession focuses on the holistic care of the patient with the ability to consider the complexity involved by using bio-psycho-social and ecological perspective. It assesses how the psychological and social context of the individual may impact upon the individual's health needs and ability to return to optimal health and wellbeing..."*²⁰

The underlying theoretical perspective for the work started by the Ida Cannon, the pioneer Social Worker in healthcare setting appointed at the "Massachusetts General Hospital" in the early 1900s, was also related to addressing the socio-environmental, physical and emotional determinants influencing the health.²¹ In the context of the BPS approach, the role of Social Work in healthcare setting has become more central and supporting. Within this perception, Social Worker can make a better assessment of the psycho-social, environmental as well as all other non-medical factors affecting the health to identify the needs, weaknesses and strength of the patient to make him capable to be healthier for better social functioning.²⁰ Ketherine, in the light of BPS approach, proposed a well effective healthcare team by including a physician, pharmacist, nutritionist, nurse and a social worker. The position of the social worker in the team, according to the Ketherine, is most significant and central with the function to furnish an inclusive understanding of the adverse determinants influencing the health of the diseased person. Focusing on "person in environment" approach, the social worker can make a diagnosis of the affects of the socio-cultural, economic and environmental factors affecting the psycho-social functioning of the ill person.²² Being team member, a Medical Social Worker can assist the diseased person in managing anxiety, fear and stress. Social worker unlike physician or other team members focuses on holistic care in achieving the goal of absolute rehabilitation and wellbeing of the patients.²³ Babalola et al are also of the view that a physician's expertise is limited merely to address the biological disorders hence; a social worker will be the part of team to make out the psycho-social factors contributing to the disease.²⁴ Professional Social Workers, in many healthcare systems are playing crucial role in healthcare field by practicing distinctive "Social Case Work" and "Social Group Work" methods to identify and address the psycho-social and other non-medical determinants of health. They have a substantive contribution in planning and policy initiatives

pertaining to the healthcare. They also deliver lectures in medical intuitions on psycho-social determinants of health.²⁵

CONCLUSION/ SUMMARY

The Shifting paradigm from bio-medical to bio-psycho-social approach in healthcare setting corroborates the strong relationship between the health and social functioning. Unlike bio-medical model which confined the health merely to the non-existence of physical disorder in the body, the BPS approach believe that social and psychological determinants have also considerable impacts on health. Despite an open acknowledgment of the need and efficacy of this new approach in the healthcare, its application is still quite limited. The approach has been considered time consuming, expensive and far beyond the capability and aptitude of the health professionals who are not well trained to address the psycho-social determinants. The physician's expertise is limited merely to address the biological disorders and dealing with the psychosocial and other non-medical determinants are considered out of the domain of their practice. The holistic nature of BPS model necessitates multidisciplinary healthcare team to deal with the multidimensional needs of a diseased person. The Social Work as a profession with history of multidisciplinary team work focuses on the reduction of the psycho-social and environmental determinants, something fundamental to the well being and health consequences. The MSW discipline believes that psycho-social and environmental conditions tend to affect each other and required to be identified and addressed effectively so as to comprehend the nature of illness in helping individual, families and communities in healthcare setting. Disease has been considered not only the biological disorder but a combination of psychological, social and environmental aspects which all are equally responsible for poor health conditions and necessary to be addressed for absolute recovery. This study concludes that the interventions of Social work profession with its unique attributes such as breadth, holistic care and believe in absolute rehabilitation, can make the health system more responsive and trustworthy for the public.

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