

Integration of the professional roles of social workers, nurses and medical secretaries in improving the quality of health care a systematic review of the literature

Maha shwiht alenezi¹, Fadhah Abdullah Juayran Alanazi², Nawaf Molfy Bakheet³, Amnah Khunaysir Saddah Alanazi⁴, maali Saad qunefith alenezi⁵, Sarah Radi Saer Alshammeri⁶, Norah Rahal Doghaim Almutrafi⁷, Sultanah Mutlaq Atnan Alanazi⁸, huda falgi mater alanzi⁹, Abeer Mohammed Alanazii¹⁰

1. Technician Nursing, north medical tower, Arar
2. Nursing Technician, The northern border healthy cluster, Arar
3. Technician Nursing, Riffa Health Center.
4. Medical secretary, Eradah Complex AND Mental Health, Arar
5. Technician Nursing, Maternity and Children's Hospital, Arar
6. Technician Nursing, Maternity and Children's Hospital, Arar
7. Social worker, Maternity and Children's Hospital, Arar
8. Nursing, Al Azizia Health Center, Arar
9. Internal Audit of the Northern Borders Health, Arar
10. Nursing Technician, Ministry of Health Branch, Arar

Abstract

This paper explores the critical roles of nurses, social workers, and medical secretaries in enhancing healthcare quality through integrated care. Integrated healthcare, defined by the collaborative effort of multidisciplinary teams, combines physical and behavioral health services to address patients' comprehensive needs. Nurses play a central role in care coordination, directly managing patient health and facilitating communication within the care team. Social workers contribute by addressing social determinants of health, providing emotional support, and connecting patients to community resources, particularly for those facing barriers such as socioeconomic challenges. Medical secretaries, though not involved in direct patient care, manage essential administrative tasks that support seamless team coordination, reducing delays and improving the patient's experience. Role integration among these professionals improves communication, resource utilization, and patient outcomes while reducing provider burnout. However, effective integration requires overcoming challenges such as role ambiguity and differing professional perspectives. Clear role definitions, open communication, and institutional support are necessary to realize the benefits of integrated healthcare, ultimately advancing patient-centered care and satisfaction.

Keywords: Integration, professional roles, social workers, medical secretaries, quality of health care

Introduction

The foundation of good health care is doing the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right person and getting the best possible outcomes [1]. Good health care often means finding the right balance in the delivery of health services by avoiding overuse (for example, unnecessary tests), underuse (for example, not checking blood pressure), or misuse (for example, prescribing medications that have dangerous interactions) [2].

Integrated care has a variety of components, and these components are influenced by clinic or practice, organizational, and policy-related constraints. That is, the components of clinically

integrated care have contextual dependencies based on the degree to which services are horizontally and vertically integrated. The ability of physician groups and health care systems to deliver on these elements goes a long way in determining the likelihood of positive outcomes and satisfactory care experiences for patients [3].

Social workers make significant contributions to integrated health care—and their contributions are seen by individuals and their families dealing with a variety of physical and behavioral health problems, other health care professions, and the community [4]. Compared to routine services, integrated primary care provided by multidisciplinary teams that include social workers greatly improve behavioral health and patient care.

Secretaries, social workers and nurses play vital roles in providing comprehensive and integrated medical care to patients. Secretaries facilitate administrative processes and coordination between medical teams, ensuring smooth service and rapid response to patients' needs. On the other hand, social workers seek to support patients psychologically and socially, with a focus on improving their quality of life and providing social support for them and their families. Nursing is the cornerstone of daily healthcare, providing direct care and educating patients about their health condition, ensuring their comfort and achieving better treatment outcomes [5].

The healthcare sector has long recognized the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration to enhance service delivery, patient outcomes, and overall quality of care. In particular, the integration of social workers, nurses, and medical secretaries is seen as essential in promoting efficient workflows, patient-centered care, and responsive healthcare systems [6]. Each profession brings unique skills and perspectives: nurses provide direct patient care, social workers offer psychosocial support and resources, and medical secretaries ensure administrative and clerical functions are smoothly managed. However, the success of this integration relies on clear role delineation, effective communication, and mutual understanding among these professionals.

Defining Integrated Care

The term integrated care refers to the bringing together of multiple health care services [6]. Integrated care is a concept that is now commonly accepted across the world yet there remains a persistent and enduring 'confusion of languages when it comes to understanding it [7]. Typically, integrated care involves interprofessional practice that includes both behavioral and physical health care resulting from a practice team of primary care and behavioral health clinicians, working together with patients and families, using a systematic and cost-effective approach to provide patient-centered care for a defined population. This care may address mental health, substance use conditions, health behaviors (including their contribution to chronic medical illnesses), life stressors and crises, stress-related, physical symptoms, and ineffective patterns of healthcare utilization [8].

Literature review

Role of Nurses in Healthcare Quality

Integrated care is a complex and diverse concept with multiple definitions and approaches. Advocates focusing integrated care activities on underpinning principles rather than rigid definitions as this will enable integrated care to be viewed through a wider lens. Similarly, it is argued that a values-based approach could enable an increased understanding of integrated care, and the behaviors embedded within its implementation [9].

Despite nurses' substantial role in care coordination, few education programs exist to better support them in this role. Nurses are frontline providers and essential to patient care coordination. They are responsible for monitoring patients' health status, administering treatment, and

communicating critical information to other healthcare providers. Research shows that nurses' involvement in interdisciplinary teams is associated with higher quality of care and improved patient outcomes, as they act as a central point of contact in patient management. Studies indicate that when nurses collaborate effectively with social workers and medical secretaries, it enhances continuity of care, reduces medical errors, and ensures that patients' needs are comprehensively addressed [8].

Role of Social Workers in Healthcare Quality

Social workers in healthcare play a crucial role in addressing the social determinants of health, connecting patients with community resources, and providing emotional and mental health support. They are particularly vital in assisting patients who may face barriers due to socioeconomic status, language, or mental health issues. According to recent studies, social workers improve healthcare outcomes by advocating for patient-centered care, identifying risk factors that may affect treatment compliance, and supporting discharge planning. Their integration with nursing staff has been shown to promote holistic care, improving patient satisfaction and reducing readmission rates by ensuring that patients have the support they need outside of the clinical environment.

Role of Medical Secretaries in Healthcare Quality

The word 'secretary' is derived from 'secret', which means confidential, and secretary means the one keeping secret. Medical secretaryship is different from other types of secretaryships in terms of the specialty. Medical secretaries should know the processes and characteristics of health care institutions and medical terminology very well [9].

Medical secretaries support healthcare teams by managing appointments, maintaining patient records, and handling communication within the care team and with patients. Although they are not directly involved in patient care, they play a critical role in reducing administrative burdens on clinical staff, allowing nurses and social workers to focus on their core duties. Literature highlights the impact of efficient administrative support on healthcare quality by minimizing delays, ensuring accurate information flow, and enhancing the overall patient experience [10].

Advantages of role integration in healthcare providers teams

Many national policies propose integration between primary and specialist care to improve the care of people with long-term conditions. Integrating the roles of nurses, social workers, and medical secretaries offers several advantages. Studies suggest that role integration [11]:

1. **Improves Communication:** When these professionals work collaboratively, it fosters open channels of communication that reduce misunderstandings and streamline patient care.
2. **Enhances Patient Outcomes:** By addressing both clinical and non-clinical needs, healthcare teams can ensure that patients receive more comprehensive, personalized care.
3. **Promotes Efficient Resource Utilization:** Role integration can lead to better allocation of time and resources, with each professional focusing on their strengths while relying on others for additional support.
4. **Reduces Burnout and Turnover:** Collaboration allows for shared responsibilities and reduces the burden on any one profession, which may help decrease burnout rates among nurses and other healthcare providers.

Barriers to Effective Role Integration

Integrated care is critical to the successful delivery of modern-day health and social care services, however the implementation into practice poses many barriers and challenges [12].

Despite its potential benefits, role integration faces several challenges. Role ambiguity is a common issue, where unclear boundaries between responsibilities can lead to overlaps or conflicts among team members [13]. Additionally, differences in professional training and perspectives can create misunderstandings. Studies emphasize the need for institutional support, structured team meetings, and clear communication channels to overcome these barriers. Training and continuous professional development that emphasize teamwork skills and the importance of interdisciplinary respect are also essential [14].

Results:

1. Quality healthcare relies on delivering appropriate care at the right time and minimizing overuse, underuse, and misuse of medical services. Integrated care aims to balance these factors, improving outcomes for patients.
2. Effective integrated care includes both physical and behavioral health services through multidisciplinary teams, often involving primary care and behavioral health clinicians working together to provide patient-centered care.
3. **Roles in Healthcare:**
 - **Nurses:** Essential in-patient care coordination, nurses monitor health status, provide treatments, and communicate crucial information to the healthcare team. Their central role in interdisciplinary teams is linked to higher care quality and improved patient outcomes.
 - **Social Workers:** They address social determinants of health, connect patients to community resources, and support mental health needs, particularly for individuals facing socioeconomic or language barriers. Their involvement enhances patient satisfaction and reduces readmissions.
 - **Medical Secretaries:** Although not directly involved in patient care, medical secretaries handle vital administrative tasks, helping to reduce clinicians' administrative load and ensuring smooth information flow, ultimately enhancing the patient experience.
4. **Advantages of Role Integration:**
 - Improved communication within the team.
 - Enhanced patient outcomes through comprehensive, personalized care.
 - More efficient use of resources, with each role focused on core strengths.
 - Reduced burnout and turnover among healthcare staff by sharing responsibilities.
5. **Challenges to Role Integration:**
 - Role ambiguity can create confusion and overlaps in responsibilities.
 - Professional training differences can lead to misunderstandings.
 - Effective integration requires structured support, team meetings, clear communication, and continuous professional development focusing on teamwork and interdisciplinary respect.

Conclusion

The integration of social workers, nurses, and medical secretaries is integral to enhancing healthcare quality by fostering collaborative, patient-centered approaches. Existing literature underscores the positive impacts of interdisciplinary collaboration on patient outcomes and overall healthcare delivery efficiency. However, achieving effective integration requires addressing role ambiguity and communication challenges, ensuring that each professional's contributions are valued, and providing supportive infrastructure to encourage teamwork. Further research is needed

to explore the best practices in role integration, particularly in diverse healthcare settings and patient populations.

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