**Lecture Notes for Chapter 7: Health Care and Health Challenges**

Social workers see how the effects of negative social interactions and stigma affect health and well-being, and keep updated on the latest medical practices and health related resources. Whether working in hospitals, schools, government agencies, public health, or local community-based organizations, health social workers actively make connections between prevention and intervention, from one person to the entire population. Social workers are required to have a broad range of knowledge that includes knowing about the leading causes of death, new health care concepts and practices, and federal, state, and local policies. Due to disparities in health care access and quality, populations such as the poor, aged, illiterate, vulnerable, and chronically ill greatly need the skills and advocacy of social workers in the health care arena.

**Health Challenges and the American Health Care System**

According to the World Health Organization health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Achieving good health is a matter of attending to a person’s physical, mental, and social situation. Disease, disability, and death are the result of interconnections between human biology, lifestyle, environmental and social factors

* Life Expectancy
  + Of seventeen high income countries studied by the NIH in 2013, the U.S. had almost the highest prevalence of infant mortality, heart and lung disease, sexually transmitted infections, adolescent pregnancies, injuries, homicides, and disability. Combined, these concerns put the U.S. at the bottom of the list for life expectancy.
  + In 1900, average life expectancy in the United States was 47 years, while today average life expectancy is over 77 years.
* Threats to Americans’ Health - lifestyle threatens health and longevity in three key ways:
  + Chronic Illness – a disease that lasts for more than three months which can be controlled but not cured, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), diabetes, depression, and heart disease. Chronic diseases are the leading cause of death and disability in the United States. Social workers educate patients who are health illiterate, explain complicated medical jargon used by physicians, and connect people to community resources
  + Heart Disease - a range a conditions that includes angina, congenital heart disease, congestive heart failure (CHF), and blood vessel diseases such as coronary heart disease. Coronary heart disease is the most common type of heart disease, killing over 385,000 people annually and costing the United States $108.9 billion each year for health care services, lost productivity, and medications.
  + Stress - stress affects a person’s thoughts, feelings, mood and body. If unchecked stress affects sleep and leads to health problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes. as stress levels increase chemicals in the brain are released that affects the prefrontal cortex (decision-making area) and the amygdale (emotional system). People’s ability to think logically and reasonably decreases as stress levels increase. Social workers can help clients develop stress management skills and strategies; and point out four types of stress: time stress, anticipatory stress, encounter stress, and situational stress.
* Health Disparities and the Uninsured
  + Not all Americans have access to the highest quality of medical treatment. Socioeconomic status is related to stressful and harmful living conditions, disease, and lack of access to adequate health care. Impoverished people often have less access to fruits and vegetables, vs. highly processed cheap food.
  + Health disparities (also called healthcare inequality) refers to gaps between population groups in the availability and quality of health care, in disease rates and severity, and overall health.
* Health Care Policy in the United States
  + Health Insurance – Most Americans are insured through an employer (private insurance) or through a government supported program, such as Medicare, Medicaid, TRICARE, the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and the Veterans Health Administration (VA).
  + Affordable Care Act - In 2010 the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, known simply as the Affordable Care Act (ACA) or sometimes ObamaCare, became law. The ACA is a comprehensive health care reform law that includes provisions to expand health insurance coverage, improve health outcomes, control health costs, and improve the U.S. health care delivery system. Insurance companies are not allowed to deny coverage for pre-existing conditions. Children can now stay on their parent’s policy up to age twenty six. Yearly limits on premiums are barred, so people with catastrophic illnesses are protected. By 2018, all insurance plans are supposed to offer preventive care with no co-payments and no deductibles.
* Health Care Trends - Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) helps to ensure that all medical personnel and administrators stay aware of developments in health care practice and choose those that have the best outcomes for patients.
  + Integrative Medicine - healing-oriented medicine that considers the whole person (body, mind, and spirit), including all aspects of lifestyle. It emphasizes the therapeutic relationship and makes use of all appropriate therapies, both conventional and alternative or complementary.
  + Slow Medicine - improve the quality of life while the person is under medical care. Slow medicine shares with hospice care the goal of comfort rather than cure.
  + Prevention and Wellness – providing people the resources to maintain health and encouraging healthy lifestyles in order to prevent diseases. Healthy behaviors include eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly.
  + Recovery, Rehabilitation, and Resiliency - during recovery and rehabilitation time, social workers educate people about how to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors. They may also assess resilience levels. Resilience is an interaction between risk and protective factors within a person’s background, which can interrupt and reverse a potentially damaging process. It is a trait, and a major strength, that allows a person to “bounce back” from difficulties. In the health care context, it may facilitate recovery from disease, injury, and medical procedures.
  + Inflammation - the body’s attempt to protect itself from damaged cells, irritants, or pathogens so a healing process can occur. It can be acute or chronic.
  + Managed Care - a type of health care system created to manage, or contain, health care costs. Examples include Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs), Preferred Provider Organization (PPO), and Point of Service (POS).
  + Electronic Medical Records - allow physicians to electronically maintain files of lab results, visit notes, diagnostic test results, insurance information, demographics, health histories, and other medication information within their offices.

**Health Care and Social Work**

Services provided by professional health social workers include: advocating for patients and family caregivers; assessing needs; care and case management; educating and counseling; intervening to promote health, prevent disease, and address disparities and barriers to health care; and providing information and referrals.

* History of Health Social Work
  + 1905 - Boston’s Massachusetts General Hospital physician Dr. Richard Cabot hired medical social worker Ida Cannon, who created the first hospital social work department.
  + Health social workers were the first social work specialty group to formally organize as professionals. They had a concern for how poverty was affecting individual health outcomes and public health. The strived to humanize people’s hospital experiences and coordinate community resources.
  + Community based social workers focused on public health and social concerns such as tuberculosis, sexually transmitted infections, and sanitation.
  + 1935 – Social worker Grace Abbott helped write the Social Security Act.
* Social Workers’ Roles in Health Care Practice
  + The goals for health social workers are outlined in NASW’s 2014 *Standards for Social Workers in Health Settings.*
  + Health care social workers provide services across the lifespan from neonatal intensive care units to skilled level long term care settings. Their purpose is to help people and families to cope with illness or injury; prevent emotional and social issues from negatively influencing health; and address service delivery shortcomings.
  + Additional roles include crisis intervention, grief counseling, chart documentation, debriefing with colleagues, discharge planning, chemical dependency evaluation, mental health assessment, short term decision making counseling, ethical decision-making counseling, and facilitating support groups.
* Health Care Settings
  + Emergency Room Trauma and Urgent Care Centers - ER social workers require special training in working with patients experiencing chemical dependency and abuse concerns. Urgent care centers are convenient walk-in options for people with non-life threatening health situations. ER social workers can possess good crisis intervention skills, perform accurate and quick assessments. They build quickly build rapport, help triage accident victims, manage people who have mental disorders, counsel victims of violence, and counsel people. They are also supportive of other staff who work in the emergency room.
  + Hospitals and Acute Care - Direct patient care activities, such as discharge planning, consumes the majority of hospital social worker’s time. Direct practice includes counseling and crisis intervention.
  + VA Hospitals - VA hospitals are one of the largest employers of MSW’s as multiple service members are returning home with trauma, physical injury, and disabilities. The telehealth program provides counseling via video conferencing, and improves access to services in geographically remote areas where it can be challenging to recruit mental health professionals.
  + Home Health Care – Public and private health care agencies provide health care services in people’s homes. This is a less expensive alternative to institutions, and with the aging Baby Boomer population this service is expected to increase.
  + Long-term Care - Nursing homes with more than 120 beds are required to employ a full-time social worker with at least a bachelor’s degree in social work. The social workers do home visits, intake assessments, discharge planning, facilitate resident and family council meetings, provide educational trainings, and much more.
  + Hospice, End-of-Life & Palliative Care – Hospice is available when a patient faces a terminal illness or painful injury and is believed to have six months or less to live. Palliative care focuses on relieving and preventing the suffering of patients, whether they are expected to die soon or not. Social workers help people cope with end of life issues.
  + Rehabilitation Services – Rehabilitation is bringing a person back to a normal, healthy condition after an illness, injury, drug problem, or other event.
  + Clinics – Clinics employ social workers to conduct assessments, link people with community resources and entitlement programs, and educate in simple language about health diagnoses and prognoses.
  + Public Health Services – These agencies focus on the general well-being of communities. They may help implement community-wide programs or help alleviate an individual’s suffering.

**Diversity and Health Care**

Health disparities are directly related to the unequal distribution of social, political, economic, and environmental resources. Social workers advocate for minimizing health disparities and lessening stigma towards people with health problems.

* *Age.* The over age 80 population is the fastest growing segment of the population. When people age beyond age 65 they become eligible for Medicare.
* *Race and Ethnicity*. By the year 2030, one in four Americans over age 65 will be from a racial or ethnic minority. Racial and ethnic minorities tend to receive lower quality of care than non-minorities; therefore, patients of minority ethnicity experience greater morbidity and mortality from various chronic diseases that non-minorities.
* *Class.* Higher levels of education are associated with a longer life and an increased likelihood of obtaining or understanding basic health information.
* *Gender. W*omen report more sickness than men, yet live an average of seven years longer. While women are less likely to have a chronic health condition, they appear to be more at risk for acute illness and disability as compared to men.
* *Sexual Orientation.* Sexual minorities are at increased risk for certain negative health outcomes and are more likely to report experiencing some form of sexual assault during their lifetime compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Health care social workers will need to understand terms specific to *gender expression* such as cross-dresser, drag king or queen, passing, and transition. Also terms specific to sexual identity and sexual orientation require understanding: bisexual, gay, lesbian, coming out, queer, and MSM/WSW (men who have sex with men; women who have sex with women).
* *Intersections of diversity.* Multiple dimensions of diversity complicate and compound people’s health care needs.

**Advocacy on Behalf of People with Health Care Challenges**

* Social and Economic Justice
  + Insurance - Health social workers help people obtain insurance, and help people understand complex and confusing insurance policy language.
  + Hospitals – Social workers assist with coordination of services and tracking insurance coverage.
  + Outpatient services – Community based practices provide medical services outside of a hospital setting.
  + Veteran’s Health Care System - VA social workers may work with The Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program, counsel armed service members living with post-traumatic stress disorder, a traumatic brain injury, or substance abuse problem, or work with the Disabled American Veterans organization.
* Supportive Environment
  + Accessing health care can be challenging in remote areas.
* Human Needs and Rights
  + People value health care characterized by personal choice, ethical decision-making, resources to maximize health or well-being, and the chance to be understood and respected. Often these values or needs are compromised because of health disparities or stigma and discrimination.
* Political Access
  + Health care related policies are political.
  + At the micro level, social workers can help clients to access health services and to obtain better health literacy.

**Your Career and Health Care**

* There is an expected 25% increase in job availability for health social workers. The NASW assesses that 14% of social workers practice in health-related settings and the number is expected to increase by 34%.
* To have a successful career in health social work it is helpful to have
* knowledge of medical terminology
* understanding of the roles of all healthcare team members
* understanding of the bio-psychosocial-cultural and spiritual aspects of illness and health
* crisis intervention skills
* short-term counseling skills
* knowledge about care culturally competent planning and discharge planning processes and community resources