

Medical Social Work Interventions and Mental Health Service Delivery in the General Hospital, Calabar

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Abstract

Mental health service delivery in Nigeria continues to face significant challenges, including stigma, limited access to care, and inadequate psychosocial support for patients. Medical social work interventions have been identified as a critical component of comprehensive mental healthcare, particularly within general hospital settings. This study examines the nature and effectiveness of medical social work interventions in mental health service delivery at the General Hospital, Calabar. Adopting a cross-sectional survey design, the study targeted mental health patients and healthcare professionals within the hospital. The study population comprised 520 registered mental health service users and relevant health personnel, from which a sample of 260 respondents was selected using a stratified sampling technique. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and key informant interviews. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise respondents' characteristics and types of social work interventions, while chi-square and regression analyses were employed to test the relationship between medical social work interventions and mental health service delivery outcomes at the 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that counselling, psychosocial support, family engagement, and referral services significantly improved treatment adherence, service utilisation, and patient satisfaction. However, the effectiveness of these interventions was constrained by inadequate staffing, limited funding, and weak institutional support. The study concludes that strengthening medical social work services within general hospitals is essential for improving mental health service delivery. Policy and institutional reforms that enhance the integration and capacity of medical social workers are therefore recommended.

Keywords: *Medical social work; Mental health service delivery; Psychosocial interventions; General Hospital*

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Background to the Study

Mental health disorders constitute a major public health challenge globally, accounting for a significant proportion of the global burden of disease. In low- and middle-income countries such as Nigeria, mental health service delivery is often constrained by inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained professionals, stigma, and weak integration of psychosocial care into mainstream healthcare services (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). General hospitals play a critical role in providing first-line mental health services; however, biomedical approaches often dominate care delivery, with limited attention given to patients' psychosocial, familial, and socio-economic needs.

Medical social work is a specialised field of social work practice that addresses the psychological, social, and environmental factors influencing health and illness. In mental healthcare settings, medical social workers provide psychosocial counselling, family support, advocacy, referral services, and community reintegration support for patients living with mental health conditions (Browne, 2019). These interventions are particularly important in contexts where stigma, poverty, and family dynamics significantly affect treatment adherence and recovery outcomes. In Nigeria, despite policy recognition of the importance of psychosocial care in mental health service delivery, the role of medical social work remains underutilised and under-researched, especially at the level of general hospitals. In Calabar, anecdotal evidence suggests that patients receiving medical social work support demonstrate better engagement with treatment and improved social functioning; however, empirical evidence to substantiate these observations remains limited. This study therefore seeks to examine medical social work interventions and their influence on mental health service delivery at the General Hospital, Calabar.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to examine the relationship between medical social work interventions and mental health service delivery at the General Hospital, Calabar. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Identify the types of medical social work interventions provided to mental health patients at the General Hospital, Calabar;
2. Assess the level of mental health service delivery outcomes, including service utilisation, treatment adherence, and patient satisfaction;
3. Examine the relationship between medical social work interventions and mental health service delivery outcomes; and
4. Identify the challenges affecting the effectiveness of medical social work interventions in mental health service delivery.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of medical social work interventions are provided to mental health patients at the General Hospital, Calabar?
2. What is the level of mental health service delivery outcomes among patients at the General Hospital, Calabar?

3. Is there a relationship between medical social work interventions and mental health service delivery outcomes?
4. What challenges affect the effectiveness of medical social work interventions in mental health service delivery at the General Hospital, Calabar?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between medical social work interventions and mental health service delivery at the General Hospital, Calabar.

H₀₂: Medical social work interventions do not significantly influence treatment adherence among mental health patients at the General Hospital, Calabar.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between medical social work interventions and patient satisfaction with mental health services at the General Hospital, Calabar.

Literature Review

Conceptual Clarification

Medical Social Work

Medical social work is a specialised field of professional social work that focuses on addressing the psychosocial and socio-economic challenges faced by patients and their families within healthcare settings. It integrates social work principles into medical care by supporting patients to cope with illness, treatment demands, and the social consequences of health conditions (Browne, 2019). In mental health contexts, medical social workers play a crucial role in bridging the gap between clinical treatment and patients' social environments, thereby enhancing holistic care delivery. Medical social work interventions typically include psychosocial counselling, family mediation, patient advocacy, referral and linkage to community resources, discharge planning, and follow-up services. These interventions are designed to reduce emotional distress, improve treatment compliance, and strengthen social support systems, all of which are critical for effective mental health care delivery (Enekoga & Owoyemi, 2021).

Mental Health Service Delivery in Hospital Settings

Mental health service delivery refers to the organisation, accessibility, quality, and continuity of services provided to individuals with mental health conditions. In hospital settings, effective mental health service delivery involves timely access to care, adherence to treatment, patient satisfaction, continuity of care, and improved psychosocial wellbeing (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). However, mental health service delivery in many low- and middle-income countries, including Nigeria, is constrained by inadequate funding, limited mental health professionals, stigma, and weak health systems. In Nigeria, mental health services are often hospital-based and dominated by clinical approaches, with insufficient attention given to the social determinants of mental illness such as poverty, unemployment, family instability, and social exclusion (Onoka, Hanson, & Mills, 2011). These gaps

underscore the importance of medical social work interventions in enhancing mental health outcomes beyond clinical treatment.

Medical Social Work Interventions and Mental Health Outcomes

Empirical evidence from diverse healthcare settings indicates that medical social work interventions play a significant role in improving mental health outcomes by addressing the psychosocial and structural factors that influence illness experience, treatment adherence, and recovery. These interventions operate at individual, family, and institutional levels, thereby strengthening overall mental health service delivery. Psychosocial counselling remains one of the most critical medical social work interventions in mental healthcare. Through therapeutic counselling, emotional support, and crisis intervention, medical social workers help patients cope with anxiety, depression, stigma, and emotional distress associated with mental illness. Studies show that consistent psychosocial counselling enhances patients' understanding of their conditions, improves coping capacity, and promotes adherence to prescribed treatment regimens, ultimately contributing to improved psychological wellbeing (House, 1981). By fostering trust and emotional stability, counselling also facilitates sustained engagement with mental health services.

Family engagement and mediation constitute another core intervention with substantial implications for mental health outcomes. Mental illness often places significant emotional, financial, and caregiving burdens on families, which can negatively affect patient recovery. Medical social workers intervene by mediating family conflicts, providing caregiver counselling, and facilitating shared decision-making. Evidence suggests that involving family members in care planning strengthens social support systems, reduces caregiver strain, and improves continuity of care, all of which are essential for long-term recovery and relapse prevention (Berkman et al., 2000). Patient advocacy is a vital mechanism through which medical social workers promote equitable access to mental health services. Advocacy efforts focus on assisting patients to navigate complex healthcare systems, overcome bureaucratic barriers, access financial and welfare support, and protect their rights within clinical settings. Research indicates that effective advocacy enhances service utilisation, reduces treatment discontinuation, and increases patient satisfaction, particularly among economically disadvantaged and socially marginalised populations (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2020). Advocacy also contributes to reducing discrimination and stigma within healthcare institutions.

Referral and follow-up services further reinforce positive mental health outcomes by ensuring continuity of care beyond the hospital setting. Medical social workers coordinate referrals to community-based mental health services, non-governmental organisations, rehabilitation centres, and social welfare agencies. Follow-up mechanisms help monitor patients' progress, encourage treatment compliance, and prevent loss to follow-up after discharge. These interventions are particularly important in resource-constrained environments where gaps in mental health service provision are common.

Medical social work interventions significantly enhance mental health outcomes by integrating psychosocial support, family involvement, advocacy, and continuity of care into clinical treatment processes. When effectively implemented, these interventions contribute to improved emotional wellbeing, stronger social support networks, and more efficient utilisation of mental health services, underscoring the indispensable role of medical social workers in comprehensive mental healthcare delivery.

Socio-Economic and Institutional Challenges Affecting Medical Social Work Practice

Despite the recognised relevance of medical social work to mental health service delivery, its effectiveness within Nigerian healthcare institutions is significantly constrained by a range of socio-economic and institutional challenges. These challenges limit the scope, quality, and sustainability of psychosocial interventions provided to mental health patients, particularly in general hospital settings. Institutional and organisational constraints remain one of the most critical barriers to effective medical social work practice. Studies indicate that inadequate funding of hospital social welfare units severely restricts the availability of essential resources required for psychosocial counselling, patient follow-up, and welfare support services (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2020). In many public hospitals, medical social workers operate with minimal logistical support, insufficient office space, and limited access to welfare funds, which undermines their ability to respond adequately to patients' psychosocial needs. Additionally, high patient-to-social worker ratios result in excessive workloads, reducing the time available for individual counselling, family engagement, and community linkage.

Limited professional recognition and weak policy support further undermine the practice of medical social work in mental healthcare. In many Nigerian hospitals, medical social workers are inadequately integrated into multidisciplinary mental health teams, leading to marginalisation in clinical decision-making processes. The absence of clear institutional policies defining the roles of medical social workers within mental health services often results in role ambiguity and underutilisation of their expertise. Consequently, psychosocial care is frequently treated as secondary to biomedical interventions, despite evidence of its importance in mental health recovery.

Socio-economic challenges affecting patients also pose significant barriers to effective mental health service delivery. Widespread poverty, unemployment, and low health insurance coverage exacerbate financial barriers to accessing and sustaining mental healthcare. Many mental health patients are unable to afford diagnostic tests, medications, transportation for follow-up visits, and long-term treatment, leading to delayed care, treatment discontinuation, and relapse (Aregbeshola & Khan, 2018). Although medical social workers intervene through financial counselling, advocacy, and referral to charitable organisations, their capacity to alleviate these burdens is often constrained by limited welfare funds and weak inter-agency collaboration.

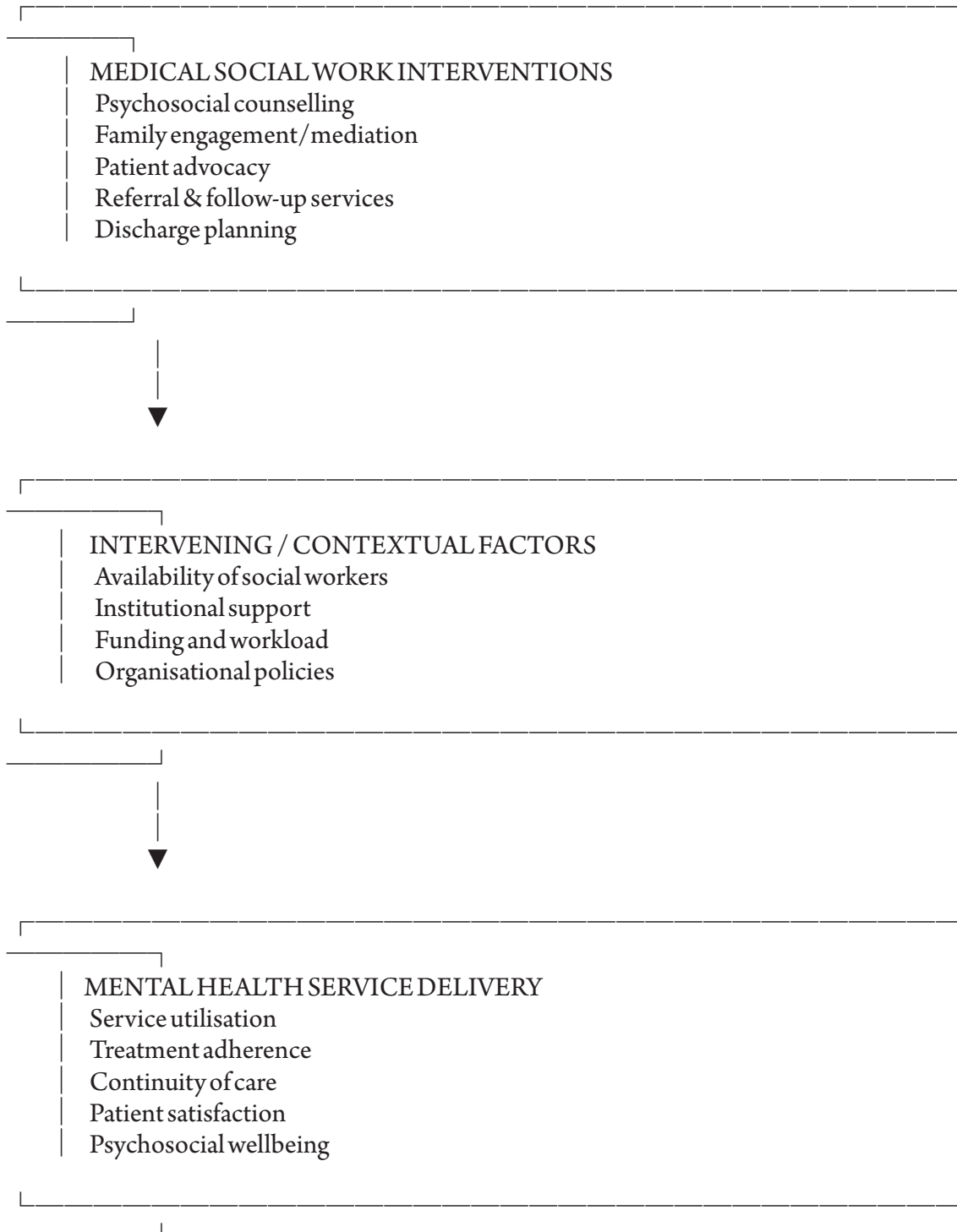
From a theoretical perspective, stress and coping theory provides a useful framework for understanding the role of medical social work in mitigating the impact of these challenges.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) posit that psychological stress occurs when individuals perceive that environmental demands exceed their available coping resources. Mental illness, compounded by poverty and institutional barriers, intensifies stress among patients and their families. Medical social work interventions enhance coping capacities by providing emotional support, problem-solving skills, and access to social and financial resources, thereby reducing stress and improving treatment engagement. Social support theory further explains how social relationships and institutional support influence mental health outcomes. According to House (1981), strong social support networks are associated with improved mental wellbeing, reduced relapse rates, and better adherence to treatment. Medical social workers play a central role in strengthening these support systems through family engagement, caregiver counselling, and community linkage. However, when institutional and socio-economic constraints weaken these support mechanisms, the effectiveness of social work interventions is significantly diminished.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of medical social work in healthcare delivery, empirical evidence focusing specifically on its role in mental health service delivery within general hospitals in Nigeria remains limited. Existing studies are largely descriptive or focused on specialised psychiatric institutions, with insufficient attention given to general hospital settings such as the General Hospital, Calabar. This gap in empirical literature underscores the need for context-specific studies that examine how medical social work interventions contribute to mental health service delivery outcomes within general hospitals. The present study seeks to address this gap by empirically assessing the contributions and challenges of medical social work practice in mental health service delivery in the General Hospital, Calabar.

Conceptual Framework

Medical Social Work Interventions and Mental Health Service Delivery



The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between medical social work interventions and mental health service delivery outcomes at the General Hospital, Calabar. Medical social work interventions constitute the independent variable and include psychosocial counselling, family engagement and mediation, patient advocacy, referral and follow-up services, and discharge planning. These interventions are designed to address the psychosocial, familial, and socio-economic challenges commonly experienced by mental health patients.

Mental health service delivery represents the dependent variable and is reflected in outcomes such as service utilisation, treatment adherence, continuity of care, patient satisfaction, and psychosocial wellbeing. Effective service delivery is expected to improve when patients receive comprehensive psychosocial support alongside clinical treatment.

The framework also recognises the influence of intervening or contextual factors, such as the availability of trained medical social workers, institutional support, funding, workload, and organisational policies. These factors can either enhance or constrain the effectiveness of medical social work interventions. Moreover, the framework assumes that when medical social work interventions are adequately supported and effectively implemented, they positively influence mental health service delivery outcomes. Conversely, weak institutional support may limit the impact of these interventions despite their relevance. This conceptual model therefore provides a logical basis for examining the role of medical social work in improving mental health service delivery within general hospital settings.

Methodology

Research Design: The study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive survey design, which allowed for the collection of quantitative data from respondents at a single point in time. This design was considered appropriate for examining relationships between medical social work interventions and mental health service delivery outcomes.

Study Area: The study was conducted at the General Hospital, Calabar, located in Cross River State, Nigeria. The hospital provides outpatient and inpatient mental health services and serves as a major referral centre for mental health care within the Calabar metropolis and surrounding communities.

Study Population: The study population comprised mental health patients receiving care at the General Hospital, Calabar, as well as relevant healthcare professionals, including medical social workers, psychiatric nurses, and mental health clinicians. Hospital records indicated an estimated population of 520 registered mental health service users during the study period.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique: A sample size of 260 respondents was selected using a stratified sampling technique to ensure proportional representation of patients and healthcare professionals. Patients were selected through systematic random sampling, while healthcare professionals were selected purposively based on their involvement in mental health service delivery.

Instrument for Data Collection: Data was collected using a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher. The instrument consisted of sections on socio-demographic characteristics, types of medical social work interventions received, mental health service delivery outcomes, and perceived challenges affecting service delivery. A Likert-scale format was used to measure respondents' perceptions. **Validity and Reliability of the Instrument:** Content and face validity of the instrument were established through expert review by specialists in medical social work and mental health. A pilot study was conducted, and the reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded acceptable reliability values.

Method of Data Collection: The questionnaires were administered directly to respondents with the assistance of trained research assistants. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly adhered to throughout the study.

Data Analysis: Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, were used to summarise the data. Inferential statistics, including chi-square and regression analysis, were employed to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Support Theory and Stress and Coping Theory, which together provide a robust explanation for the role of medical social work in mental health service delivery.

Social Support Theory

Social Support Theory, as articulated by House (1981) and Berkman et al. (2000), posits that emotional, informational, and instrumental support from social networks significantly influences individuals' health outcomes. Mental health patients often experience weakened informal support systems due to stigma and discrimination. Medical social workers provide formal social support through counselling, family engagement, advocacy, and linkage to resources, thereby compensating for deficits in informal support networks. This theory explains how medical social work interventions improve treatment adherence, service utilisation, and patient satisfaction.

Stress and Coping Theory

The Stress and Coping Theory developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explains how individuals respond to psychological stressors based on their appraisal of stress and available coping resources. Mental illness represents a major stressor for patients and families. Medical social work interventions enhance coping capacity by providing psychosocial support, problem-solving strategies, and access to resources. By strengthening coping mechanisms, medical social work contributes to improved mental health outcomes and effective service delivery.

Data Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 260)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	118	45.4
	Female	142	54.6
Age	18–29 years	64	24.6
	30–39 years	88	33.8
	40–49 years	70	26.9
	50 years and above	38	14.7
Education	No formal education	46	17.7
	Primary	62	23.8
	Secondary	94	36.2
	Tertiary	58	22.3

Respondents were predominantly within the economically active age group, with more females than males, and most had at least secondary education, which has implications for mental health awareness and service utilisation.

Table 2: Medical Social Work Interventions Received by Respondents

Intervention	Yes (%)	No (%)
Psychosocial counselling	76.9	23.1
Family engagement/mediation	61.5	38.5
Advocacy and welfare support	54.2	45.8
Referral and follow-up services	58.1	41.9

Psychosocial counselling was the most frequently accessed intervention, while advocacy and follow-up services were less utilised, reflecting institutional and resource constraints.

Table 3: Mental Health Service Delivery Outcomes

Outcome Indicator	Adequate (%)	Inadequate (%)
Treatment adherence	68.8	31.2
Regular service utilisation	64.6	35.4
Patient satisfaction	71.9	28.1

Most respondents reported positive mental health service delivery outcomes, suggesting the relevance of psychosocial support within hospital-based care.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between medical social work interventions and mental health service delivery.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test of Medical Social Work Interventions and Service Delivery

χ^2	df	p-value	Decision
21.384	4	0.000	Reject H ₀

Result: A statistically significant relationship exists between medical social work interventions and mental health service delivery outcomes ($p < 0.05$).

Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: Medical social work interventions do not significantly influence treatment adherence.

Table 5: Regression Analysis of Medical Social Work Interventions and Treatment Adherence

Variable	β	t-value	p-value
Medical social work interventions	0.437	7.124	0.000

Result: Medical social work interventions significantly influenced treatment adherence among mental health patients.

Hypothesis Three

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between medical social work interventions and patient satisfaction.

Table 6: Correlation Analysis

Variables	r	p-value
Social work interventions & patient satisfaction	0.462	0.001

Result: A moderate and statistically significant positive relationship exists between medical social work interventions and patient satisfaction.

Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that medical social work interventions significantly enhance mental health service delivery at the General Hospital, Calabar. Psychosocial counselling, family engagement, and referral services were associated with improved treatment adherence, increased service utilisation, and higher levels of patient satisfaction. These findings align with Social Support Theory, which emphasises the importance of structured support systems in improving health outcomes (House, 1981; Berkman et al., 2000). The significant influence of medical social work on treatment adherence supports earlier studies which argue that

psychosocial support and family involvement are critical for sustained engagement in mental health treatment (Browne, 2019; Enekoga & Owoyemi, 2021). The positive relationship between social work interventions and patient satisfaction further underscores the importance of addressing non-clinical dimensions of mental healthcare. However, the relatively lower utilisation of advocacy and follow-up services suggests the presence of institutional challenges, including high caseloads and limited staffing, which constrain the effectiveness of medical social work practice.

Conclusion

This study has empirically demonstrated that medical social work interventions constitute a vital component of effective mental health service delivery at the General Hospital, Calabar. The findings indicate that psychosocial counselling, family engagement, patient advocacy, and referral and follow-up services provided by medical social workers significantly contribute to improved treatment adherence, increased utilisation of mental health services, and enhanced patient satisfaction. By addressing the psychosocial, economic, and familial dimensions of mental illness, medical social workers complement clinical interventions and promote a more holistic approach to mental healthcare.

The study further reveals that family-focused interventions and sustained psychosocial support are particularly important in mitigating stigma, strengthening social support networks, and improving continuity of care for individuals living with mental health conditions. These interventions help patients and their families better understand mental illness, cope with treatment demands, and actively participate in the recovery process, thereby improving overall service delivery outcomes. However, despite these notable contributions, the effectiveness of medical social work practice remains constrained by institutional and systemic challenges, including inadequate funding, limited staffing, high patient-to-social worker ratios, weak policy recognition, and insufficient integration of social workers into multidisciplinary mental health teams. These constraints undermine the capacity of medical social workers to deliver comprehensive and sustained interventions, especially in resource-constrained public health settings. In conclusion, the study underscores the necessity of strengthening the institutional positioning and professional recognition of medical social work within mental healthcare systems in Nigeria. Enhancing the integration of medical social work interventions into mental health service delivery frameworks is essential for addressing the complex social determinants of mental illness and for achieving improved, equitable, and sustainable mental health outcomes in general hospital settings.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Strengthening Medical Social Work Units:** Hospital management should strengthen medical social work units through improved funding, recruitment of additional social workers, and provision of operational resources.
2. **Integration into Mental Health Teams:** Medical social workers should be fully integrated into multidisciplinary mental health care teams to ensure holistic service delivery.

3. Capacity Building and Training: Continuous professional development programmes should be implemented to enhance the skills of medical social workers in mental health practice.
4. Family-Centred Mental Health Policies: Mental health policies should promote family involvement as a core component of treatment and rehabilitation.
5. Community-Based Follow-Up and Referral Systems: Strong referral and follow-up mechanisms should be developed to ensure continuity of care and reduce relapse rates among mental health patients.

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