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Quality of Life SERIES

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Improving Quality of Life in Long-term Care: Psychosocial Care and The Role of Social Work

For anyone we care about who is faced with the prospect of moving into a long-term care home, we would want that person to enjoy the best sense of well-being and quality of life possible under the circumstances. While we as individuals each may differ in how we define a good quality of life and what we believe we need for our own wellbeing, safety, physical comfort, enjoyment, meaningful activities, relationships, dignity, privacy, individuality, choice, and spiritual wellbeing are considered key aspects.

Psychosocial care in long-term care homes promotes a greater quality of life by recognizing and addressing the social and emotional needs of persons living in long-term care. Psychosocial needs are related to a wide range of individual circumstances such as adjusting to changes in relationships, lack of social support, legal or financial problems, living with chronic health or mental health conditions, inability to cope with loss of function, substance misuse issues and behavioural symptoms related to dementia. Caregivers who support family and friends living in long-term care also experience their own psychosocial stressors and may also appreciate emotional support.

Some individuals who live in long-term care are affected by more than one health condition which increases the complexity of their needs; this may not always be recognized and understood. Persons with dementia may sometimes exhibit behaviours that are distressing to others, and care involves the need for thorough assessment and knowledgeable staff.

In short, caring for our vulnerable citizens with diverse and complex needs who live in long-term care requires knowledgeable and personalized approaches best delivered by a health care team comprised of different professional disciplines each with a part to play in addressing unmet psycho-social needs. With their education and training in psychosocial assessments, communication skills, family dynamics, and organizational systems, along with their commitment to upholding the values of human rights, social workers are uniquely equipped to play a key role. Social workers spend their time not only by engaging directly with the residents and families to provide emotional support, but also indirectly by participating in care planning to voice person-centered care and person-in-environment perspectives. In their aim to promote positive change

for individuals living in long-term care, social workers advocate for change at the level of individual as well as the broader organization.

A recent study in British Columbia examined the role of social work in long-term care. Karen Lok Yi Wong (2021) found that social workers in long-term care worked to advocate for the vulnerable, honour self-determination, and facilitate collaboration among residents, families, and team members. By engaging with residents and building deep relationships, social workers were able to bring forward the voices of the residents, helping their perspectives to be understood. In long-term care the need for individuals to exercise self-determination often needs to be balanced with the safety of the resident as well as others. Honouring personal autonomy is a value integral to the social work profession, and the social workers participated in care planning conversations that sought to balance choice and dignity with the need to reduce risk. Social workers were also seen to facilitate collaboration by nurturing relationships and bringing people together to hear each other's meanings and see the common goals.

While social workers are seen to play valuable roles that contribute to improving quality of life, not all long-term care facilities may have access to this resource. Unlike other jurisdictions, in British Columbia the requirement for long-term care facilities to employ social workers does not exist. The British Columbia Association of Social Workers has called upon the provincial government to mandate social work positions in long-term care.

Some Suggestions:

- If you have concerns about a resident with unmet social and emotional needs, speak to the social worker at the long-term care home. If the home does not have a social worker, seek out other members of the team who are best positioned to listen and communicate to the other members of the care team.
- If the long-term care home does not have a social worker, try speaking to the manager about the value a social worker contributes and the possibility of bringing a social worker onto the team.
- Lobby the government to establish a mandate for long-term care homes to be staffed by care teams with sufficient hours that include a range of disciplines including social work.

Further Reading:

Kusmaul, N., Roberts, A., Hector, P., Galambos, C., Zimmerman, S., Bern-Klug, M., Connolly, R., Wang, X., & Herman, C. (2023). Social workers critical to honoring commitments to residents and families in long-term care. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 66:6,811-821.

Morley, J., Kusmaul, N., & Berg-Weger, M. (2021). Meaningful engagement in the nursing home. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 64-1,33-42.

Simons, K., Bern-Klug, M., An, S. (2012). Envisioning quality psychosocial care in nursing homes: The role of social work. *JAMDA*, 13.

Wong, K. (2021). How do social workers working in long-term care understand their roles?: Using British Columbia, Canada as an example. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 64:5, 452-470.