

The social worker in the hospital oncology department is an integral part of on going patient care and treatment. The patient population represents all religions, countries of origin, cultures, ethnic groups, languages, customs, beliefs, and awareness or denial of medical conditions. The social worker must identify these different traits and use them as she works with each patient and family.

She must be able to earn the patient's and family's trust and cooperation as the patients and family members are scared, apprehensive, lack information, and feel doctors do not spend enough time with them. She must talk with them, provide information and support, and attempt to calm their fears and anxieties.

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote that patients and families go through various stages as they deal and cope with cancer, its treatment, and progression. The stages are denial, anger, bargaining, experiencing depression, and acceptance of their condition and they apply to cancer patients and their families.

Oncology social work is modeled on crisis intervention and is task oriented. Patients and families are helped to address and find solutions for their existing problems, take responsibility for their actions, obtain information about treatments and medications, formulate questions, come to terms with cancer, and make decisions regarding continuing treatment, arranging for family and children's visits, finding lawyers, and putting their lives in order. All patients, whether they are active or apathetic in their treatment, must be respected.

The social worker is the patient's advocate and is aware of daily problems that interfere with the treatment process including family functioning, financial, and ethical problems. This enables the social worker to inform the treatment staff about special problems to be addressed that may interfere with the treatment process. She accompanies doctors on rounds, is up to date about the patient's diagnosis and treatments, works with and helps patients formulate questions, and arranges meetings with doctors. She meets with family members before a patient dies and discusses arrangements to be made. She also works closely with patients and families regarding hospital visits by friends, family, and children and suggests photographing these visits for posterity. Today communication among patients, family, and friends is easier today thanks to cell phones, the Internet, and Web cameras.

Future social work projects include writing explanatory pamphlets, studying the relationship among the ethnic groups, cultural beliefs and medicine, and preventing staff burnout.