

Medical Social Workers' Social Well-being: Tales from the Frontlines

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Abstract

Medical social workers are considered as frontline workers since they play an essential role in responding to health crises, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's main objective was to determine the experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and insights on the future of the medical social workers working on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were obtained through online interviews with five medical social workers working in the Southern Philippine Medical Center, Davao City. The researchers used phenomenological qualitative research to determine the detailed stories and experiences of the Filipino medical social workers. In determining the research participants of this study, the researchers used a snowball sampling technique. The findings of this study revealed that medical social workers were physically and emotionally exhausted, discriminated against, and fearful due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They therefore utilized various self-care activities to overcome the loneliness and fear brought by the pandemic. A strong connection with their support system likewise aided in improving and sustaining their social well-being. Despite the health and safety risks, medical social workers remained dedicated to public service and steadfastly persevered to address the needs of the patients. This study will undoubtedly inspire future researchers to delve into the social workers' experiences in the field for future global outbreaks and insights. In addition, medical social workers may use this study as an opportunity to make the social work profession more widely known to the public. Future researchers may also undertake a similar investigation exploring other indicators of well-being.

Keywords: medical social workers, social well-being, qualitative, phenomenology, Davao City (Philippines)

Introduction

As agents of change, social workers are among the frontliners in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. They are needed to respond to unprecedented situations and must habituate quickly and substantially. Thus, the presence of social workers in the field is vital. The British Association of Social Workers (2020), however, adds that, due to their high risk of exposure to the virus, the challenge of maintaining their family and other social relationships while practicing social distancing or quarantine is a great obstacle to their social well-being, making workers feel isolated and lonely.

In Wuhan City, China, the World Health Organization (2020) announced that over 10% of the global infections were composed of healthcare workers who were more subjected to stress, isolation, and emotional distress of exceptional intensity. It is therefore vital to recognize them as individuals beyond their function as frontline responders and consider their societal role as parents, spouses, and offspring (Souadka et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, to address the large number of 1,694 confirmed COVID-19 cases among health care workers as of April 30, 2020 (20% of the total number of cases), online training on infection and prevention control (IPC) was conducted among hospital workers and community health workers (World Health Organization, 2020). The Philippines' Department of Health strongly advocated compliance with at least the minimum health measures and protocols to prevent the collapse of health institutes and assist the healthcare workforce in responding to COVID-19 cases. Then Senate President Pro Tempore Ralph Recto initiated better pay for social workers to boost the morale of the frontline medical social workers, pointing out that social workers were crucial in the government's fight against COVID-19 (Torrezo, 2020).

In Davao City, the sudden escalation of virus cases was primarily associated with the residents' attendance at cockfighting matches in Matina Galleria. On April 4, 2020, the region was put under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) to control people's movement in and out of the region (Chavez, 2020). In the report by the Department of Health, the total infected cases of healthcare workers in the Davao Region increased (Capistrano, 2020). Considering the escalating cases of infected people in the region, the role of medical social workers became very much in demand. This placed them under very high risk of exposure to the virus. Hence, not only their physical but also their social well-being needed to be protected.

During the pandemic, medical health workers which included medical social workers, also experienced various forms of challenges brought about by the right-wing nationalist populism that tremendously undermined the social work practice (Magnus, 2022). Noble and Otmman (2018, p. 117) said that social policies became "more selective, narrower in scope, and socially exclusive." For instance, Biana and Joaquin (2020) found out that, while interventions were being urged to deal with the psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the general public, these should also have been urged for the healthcare workers. In the Philippines, Amnesty International (2021) pointed out that health workers were already voicing their concern regarding being overwhelmed with the lack of manpower and facilities. They were also alarmed because of their unpaid benefits and the shortage of medical-grade personal protective equipment (PPE). All these could be traced back to the lack of social policies to protect their needs during this health crisis. Faced with all these challenges in their workplace that hindered them from protecting themselves more effectively, the social well-being of the health workers was also heavily affected due to discrimination.

Kahambing (2021) reported that, during the pandemic, social workers faced multiple risks including vulnerability to the stress brought about by their COVID-19 response to people needing their service. This was supported by Redondo-Sama et al. (2020), claiming that social workers, as they responded to the needs of the vulnerable population of society, also experienced this vulnerability themselves. Social workers, especially those who worked with other healthcare providers in hospital or health facilities during the pandemic, became one of the vulnerable groups during the health crisis. Carascal et al. (2022) supported this as well by stating that many healthcare workers suffered from distress, uncertainty, dissociation, and

valuation of life. This affirms Tomacruz's (2020) statement that medical social workers faced multiple adversities during the pandemic which included interacting with patients in a time of quarantine and even causing alarm to communities due to their known exposure to high-risk individuals. All these confirmed the well-being issues that medical social workers faced during the pandemic, pointing to the need to explore their lived experiences to better understand what they encountered while in the line of duty.

Thus, this study explored the pandemic experiences of five medical social workers and the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on their social well-being. Their coping mechanisms to deal with these challenges were also looked into in this paper. Considering the usefulness of this exploration, this study may serve as an example and a reference for future discussions and may encourage future researchers to explore other aspects of social workers' well-being.

The study's primary purpose was to determine the Filipino medical social workers' experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic by investigating the experiences of five medical social workers in Davao City. The second purpose was to understand how they coped with the challenges of the pandemic. Moreover, this study aimed to discover the coping strategies they utilized to understand the struggles of those who had limited social interaction during the pandemic. Ultimately, this study unraveled possible expectations for the social work profession's future after the global health crisis. The researchers believe that, through this academic undertaking, social workers would be enlightened about the experiences of their colleagues in the profession, giving them the hope and encouragement to be continually dedicated in their line of work.

Considering the scarcity of studies on Filipino medical social workers and their lives during the pandemic, the researchers were given the impetus to conduct this study. This study is intended to fill the current research gap showing that few studies focus on the Filipino medical social workers' social well-being in the international, national, and local scene. Moreover, the researchers hope that this study can shed light on medical social workers' needs most especially when faced with various work-related crises.

Method

Research Design

The researchers used phenomenological qualitative research to determine the detailed stories and experiences of the Filipino medical social workers from Davao City and the effects of the pandemic on their social well-being. Hammarberg et al. (2016) stated that a phenomenological qualitative method is used in research to answer questions about experiences, meanings, and perspectives from the participants' standpoint through key informant interviews (KIIs). In this study, the researchers set aside their ideas about the phenomenon to understand the participants' lived experiences from the point of view of the subjects.

Research Participants

In this study, the snowball sampling technique, a non-probability type of sampling, was used in determining the five Filipino medical social workers in Davao City who were to be part of the pool of research participants. The researchers decided to choose only five participants

in order to have a closer inquiry into medical social workers' lives during the pandemic. This was based upon the recommendation of Crouch and McKenzie (2006) that having less than 20 participants in qualitative research helps a researcher build and maintain a close relationship with them and thus improve the "open" and "frank" exchange of information.

Due to some challenges in purposively choosing participants for this study, the researchers decided to employ snowball sampling to determine the five participants, aged 25 to 35 years old, for the interviews. Snowball sampling is suited for a hard-to-reach population, as in this case, since the researchers needed to observe the medical protocols of the hospitals where the participants were employed. The researchers likewise based the choice of this sampling technique on the study of Gever and Okoro (2020), which revealed that snowball sampling is recommended when the participants cannot be strictly delimited or detailed. Given the number of participants considered for this study, it must be noted that the experiences discussed herein are not representative of the entire population of Filipino medical social workers.

Data Analysis

After the interviews with the selected participants, the researchers transcribed and translated the responses. Through the help of a data analyst, who is an expert on qualitative data analysis, the researchers were able to come up with codes and themes that were then categorized per research question. Verbatim responses were used as support to the identified themes, and core ideas were also determined by the data analyst to aid the researchers in interpreting the themes more meaningfully. All thematic categorization and data interpretations were reviewed by the data analyst to ensure accuracy of qualitative data processing.

Results and Discussion

Experiences of Medical Social Workers Amidst the Pandemic

Due to the pandemic, medical social workers experienced a variety of challenges such as emotional difficulties in their job and responsibilities, as well as increased workloads, shifts, and adjustment to the new normal.

Fear Brought by Uncertainties. The participants expressed that they developed fear due to the ongoing pandemic. Fear became a common emotional reaction because the pandemic brought challenges never encountered before. Fear was also felt because the unseen virus could infect anyone, including their families. Participant 5 said,

"What we felt was fear because we don't know when we can have that virus and anytime we can be infected."

This fear was rooted in the surge in cases globally, most especially in the Philippines, as the COVID-19 outbreak grabbed news headlines throughout the world. The virus was new, fast-spreading and had a death rate of around 2% between March and April 2020, with numerous unknowns regarding its origins, nature, and course. As the number of COVID-19 infections and fatalities continued to rise (Taylor, 2020), along with the spread of news indicating the increase of cases in the community, most participants expressed that they experienced fear.

Because of the ongoing pandemic situation, the public, especially the medical frontliners, became more anxious and worried. The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching and unprecedented economic and emotional ramifications throughout the world, having a tremendous psychological impact on everyone around the globe. Fear was one of the psychological aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pakpour & Griffiths, 2020). Deacon et al. (2020) said that, when fear is excessive, the effects could be detrimental at both the individual level (e.g., mental health problems, such as phobia and social anxiety) and the social level. This supports why Participant 2 mentioned, “I experienced anxiety due to the new virus.” Participant 3 also said,

“Though we seldom interact with patients, there comes a time that my co-worker tested positive to COVID, so it causes us anxiety and other psychological effects, and we are also emotionally disturbed.”

Based on the responses, it can be gleaned that Participants 2 and 3 felt fear as they continued to provide service to the community amidst the pandemic. For them, the uncertainty of the prevailing situation caused and heightened the anxiety and stress they experienced.

Close Exposure to Serious Physical and Mental Tolls of the Disease

Part of a medical social worker's job is to assess patients and their family members to support their needs. In this study, the participants took care of the family tracing of the unclaimed bodies of COVID-19 fatalities. Thus, the participants witnessed the severity of the situation firsthand. Medical social workers demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility and concerted effort to alleviate patients' suffering despite the challenges, such as working in a completely new environment, experiencing physical exhaustion from heavy workloads and the burden of wearing protective gear, facing the fear of becoming infected and infecting others, and having a sense of powerlessness in dealing with patients' conditions. Participant 1 expressed,

“Working in a COVID hospital is fearful. We have developed fear in dealing with our clients, for we all know that it can be transmitted through sneezing, talking, and coughing and knowing that we still don't have the equipment to protect ourselves.”

With all of this, all frontline workers—including medical social workers—also need constant support and upliftment to enable them to perform their tasks adequately. Comprehensive support is needed for frontline healthcare providers, including sufficient personal protective equipment, reasonable work schedules, effective communication, monitoring and supervision of infection control, and professional psychological support (Golightley & Holloway, 2020).

According to Vizheh et al. (2020), frontline healthcare providers providing care and treatment to patients with COVID-19 have greater risks of mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and stress because they are directly exposed to the situation. As Participant 5 pointed out,

“It is very frightening to watch patients suffering, struggling to breathe, isolated and those hospital staff with their PPE’s. You will be very anxious and scared because you can see it closely.”

Emotional, psychological, and social well-being are all part of mental health. Mental health also has an impact on the way people think, feel, and act. It also influences how people deal with stress, interact with others, and make good decisions.

Concern for their Safety and That of Their Families. Medical social workers’ concern for their own safety and that of their families at home sharply increased due to their exposure to the virus during their interactions with clients, especially those who were not following the required health protocols. This was a concern of Participant 4, who stated that,

“I am afraid of being the carrier of the said virus, and I may be the reason to transmit it to one of my family members or to other people as well.”

Following the protocols such as social distancing and wearing of facemasks was crucial at that time. Complacency, such as ignoring the government’s measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus or issuing reckless policies that ignore the risks, also posed potential harm to individuals and society. Humphreys (2020) stated that, with infectious illnesses like COVID-19 accounting for over 25% of world fatalities each year, the public health system must employ every available and feasible preventative approach and epidemic management method to avoid disease transmission.

Proper wearing of facemasks was deemed one way to help mitigate the spread of the disease. Facemasks were seen as a means to guard against various respiratory illnesses that are transferred by droplets, such as the coronavirus and the flu. A facemask would prevent such droplets from coming into contact with one’s face or lips and thereby entering the body (Adalja, 2020).

In addition, social distancing, frequent handwashing, observing cough/sneeze etiquette, practicing appropriate tissue usage and disposal, avoiding touching one’s face, and respecting others were personal responsibilities that all individuals were enjoined to do. As people could spread the virus even if they were not ill or were unaware that they had been infected, maintaining a safe distance between oneself and others was considered a wise practice and one of the most effective ways to avoid contagion with the COVID-19 virus.

Practice of the Profession Became More Challenging. The nature of social work practice became more challenging due to the pandemic, as changes in work arrangements and schedules interrupted the daily practice of the profession. Adjustments in how interactions were done to comply with health and safety protocols made daily transactions difficult because extra care was required. For Participant 1, these changes were challenges to face during the pandemic as well.

“There are also changes in the schedule of our work. We adopt a skeletal work schedule where not all of us are required to go to the office and some of us are working at home. As of now, we

struggle when it comes to interviewing our clients due to safety protocol.”

The COVID-19 pandemic had many consequences for frontline and non-frontline workers, such as greater stress, heavier workloads, new workstreams, and increased caregiving obligations. COVID-19 also prompted many workers to rapidly shift to working from home.

As mentioned above, it was a major adjustment for the participants like Participant 1 to transition to a new normal, especially in delivering their services in situations where they needed to closely interact with their clients to have an intensive conversation and to assess their needs accordingly. Participant 5 expressed this concern in this way.

“The struggle is that we really want them to fully understand what we are trying to imply but, because of the barriers, some clients were unable to understand or there’s a need for us to repeat the instructions.”

In the medical social work profession, communication is vital and complex, a give-and-take process, and disruptions at any point in the cycle could prevent understanding from being achieved. A phone call, drop-in guests, distances between individuals, barriers (e.g., walls), and static on the radio are all examples of physical distractions that could detract from the efficacy of communication (Lunenburg, 2011).

Desire to Continue Service despite the Challenges. Amidst these challenges, there is a great need for the services of social workers in the medical setting. All the participants in this study still expressed willingness to render their services even if risk and fear now come with the job. Driven by passion and dedication to serve people, the participants did not let COVID-19 stop them from delivering their services and care to their clientele. Instead, their institutions and departments created alternatives to allow them to continue their services as safely as possible. In fact, the participants thought more about their job than their fear. Their passion and determination to help those in need motivated them to do more and serve people. They demonstrated their desire to help even if it meant risking their lives. Participant 5 assured,

“Fear is there and it is difficult to face the reality that we are in but personally, I am thinking of those people that need my intervention, my service. The service in medical settings should not stop because there’s a lot of sick people during this pandemic. For me, you should really embrace the situation and use precautions. The happiness when I help someone while doing my service will also help eradicate the fear.”

Despite the obstacles and struggles brought about by the changes that have occurred because of the pandemic, these medical social workers continue to endeavor to render the services that the people need and deserve.

Coping Strategies of Medical Social Workers with the Challenges of the Pandemic

The well-being of medical social workers was greatly affected by the pandemic. In order to combat its negative effects, coping strategies such as complying with health and safety regulations, maintaining solid connections with support systems, and practicing self-care became essential. While medical social workers adhered to all health and safety standards when providing services to their clients, their support systems—including family, peers, friends, and co-workers—played equally critical roles in providing them with moral and emotional support. Furthermore, despite the limitations brought by the pandemic, medical social workers practiced self-care and participated in enjoyable activities to alleviate the stress they were experiencing. These themes are discussed below.

Adherence to Health and Safety Protocols. The participants shared about utilizing coping strategies such as putting protocols in place to ensure the safety of everyone, using alternative means of interacting with clients, and employing extra precautions. These were essential in lowering the risks and worry of getting infected with the COVID-19 virus. Participant 4 expressed that following the protocols helped a lot.

“I follow the protocols such as wearing a face mask, face shield, and social distance. For me, it’s a strategy when you follow the protocols and rules of the agency you’re working at.”

According to the World Health Organization (2020), COVID-19 infection prevention for health workers necessitated a multi-pronged integrated strategy of Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) and Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) procedures. The WHO recommended that all healthcare institutions establish and implement IPS and OHS protocols to ensure the safety of their health workers.

Medical social workers also employed extra precautions, especially when coming from work, to prevent possible transmission of the virus to others. According to Howard et al. (2022), limiting infected individuals’ direct interactions by physical distancing and other measures lowering the transmission probability per contact were two effective strategies in reducing the spread of the disease. Additionally, when compliance with public mask-wearing was high, it was found to be most effective and efficient in preventing the virus from spreading.

Support System. From the data obtained, the support systems of the participants in this study were composed of their family, friends, peers, and co-workers. The family was seen as the participants’ primary support system. According to Hawryluck et al. (2004), in crises, rather than severing social relationships as part of an imposed quarantine or isolation strategy, there is a need for well-built social relationships—as was seen in the experience of the medical social workers who underwent the COVID-19 pandemic. As Participant 4 shared,

“At first, it was a struggle for me to overcome the stress, struggles, and anxieties I experienced. But, it took me months to overcome it. There were times that I chose to isolate myself and stay in my bedroom, and I don’t want anybody to talk to. But, because of my family, I overcame it. What we usually do is, we do stress debriefing - talk about our experiences for

the entire week, which eases the struggles that we encounter throughout the week.”

In fact, maintaining meaningful and positive social connections boosts health (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2015). According to Williams (2019), too, socializing is the key to good health. The participants' friends and peers served as their secondary support system, which helped maintain their mental and physical well-being. Participants 1, 2, and 5 also considered their co-workers as their support system because the latter also provided affirmation that others were going through the same challenges along with them. As Blake et al. (2020) stated, psychosocial support requires developing a psychologically safe environment, strong leadership, and effective management plans for workers' well-being, positive communications, and strong team support. Such a working environment would enhance individual resilience and allow self-compassion and self-care. Participant 1 described it in this way,

“My colleagues are my support system. If everyone is present and does not show laziness or there is no discouragement, in effect I'm also motivated to work.”

The COVID-19 pandemic inevitably hampered social interactions. However, medical social workers ensured that, despite the outbreak, they remained connected with their support systems. Although physical interactions were less frequent, they found other methods to stay in touch with their family members, friends, and peers. Maintaining strong and effective communication with their support systems contributed to reducing the stress caused by the pandemic.

Engagement in Self-care and Enjoyable Activities. From the data obtained, there were three core ideas under this theme. Participants engaged in physical activities that promoted health, such as exercise. Additionally, they made time for enjoyable activities that served as stress-relievers, such as shopping, using social media, eating, and watching movies. As mentioned in the Inaugural Conference of the International Center for Research, self-care is one strategy in uplifting individuals' social well-being (Riegel et al., 2020). Engaging in self-care activities helped the participants in battling the stresses brought by this pandemic. This is also supported by the Well-being Theory of Seligman, which states that engagement is an act of becoming highly interested, absorbed, and focused on life activities. One of these activities is the use of social media. Participant 4 shared how social media helped him, although he did emphasize to be careful with the use of it during the pandemic.

“I use social media because we can learn a lot from social media. But, we also have to make sure that we choose the right [content] to believe in. Also, I try other coping mechanisms such as learning new hobbies, eating, and trying different ways of entertainment.”

Boosting immunity by taking vitamins and flu vaccine shots also served as an effective self-care strategy for medical social workers. According to Murni et al. (2021), one of the most significant measures in preventing COVID-19-related morbidity and mortality was to have a healthy immune system. This strategy helped the participants, particularly Participants 2, 3, and 5, in combating the virus and preventing them from getting infected with it.

As mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic caused heightened anxiety among medical social workers. They were facing a difficult situation which placed them at risk, leading to fear of acquiring the disease themselves and infecting others, especially their loved ones. Among the strategies for alleviating such stressful conditions was by engaging in activities that were not only enjoyable but healthful as well. Thus, having a strong immune system helped the participants to reduce the risks of getting infected while adhering to health and safety protocols. For example, Participant 2 prioritized his health to enable him to help the clientele effectively. He mentioned, *“I’m making sure that I’m healthy. I take vitamins and have the flu vaccine.”*

The coping strategies employed by the medical social workers interviewed in this paper go back to the Empowerment Theory in the practice of social work. For the Virginia Commonwealth University (2021), empowerment is vital in social work. Therefore, social workers strive very hard to empower society and its members. However, social workers also need empowerment themselves, more so at crucial times such as the pandemic. As previously discussed, these medical social workers experienced helplessness when they first encountered the pandemic. They felt like they were facing so many uncertainties during the initial outbreak, so they felt sad and confused for themselves and their families. This is where social policies to protect the well-being of frontliners, including medical social workers, come into play as the government could create more programs to safeguard their physical, mental, emotional, and social condition as they carry out their functions. As related to the Empowerment Theory, the lack of equitable policies during the pandemic may be considered a “power block” that hindered medical social workers from achieving better social well-being amidst the health crisis.

Insights and Expectations on the Future of Social Work after COVID-19

Medical social workers were among those at the frontline of the pandemic battle, working around the clock. As a result, medical social workers anticipate that their profession and the vital role they serve in society will now be more recognized by the public. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic placed great demands on the workers’ physical, social, and economic well-being, it did not stop them from staying true to their oath of service. Social workers also expect that the pandemic experience has strengthened the connection they built with the other fields of social work and the shared commitment to continue excellent public service. These themes are discussed in the following sections of the analysis.

Social Work as a Profession Serves a Key Role in Society. The findings show that the participants were frontliners who provided assistance, support, and guidance to patients and medical workers during the pandemic. Participant 2 highlighted the important functions of a medical social worker.

“Although we don’t directly see our patients, we help our patients by facilitating their needed resources. For example, (for) COVID patients who have no watchers, what we do is we assist them by buying their medicines and other supplies. We also do the family tracing, especially on those patients who have no watchers. We also manage their hospital bills, so medical social workers are vital in this pandemic battle.”

According to Bright (2020), medical social workers did play a critical role in this crisis. Notwithstanding the newness of the virus, the profession was highly adept at managing difficulties, with training to address everything from individual fears to global policy coordination.

Recognition of the Value of Social Work. Based on the findings of this study, all the participants felt that the roles of medical social workers during the pandemic were undervalued. They did not get as much recognition as doctors and nurses did, and many people may not have been aware of how vital their duties are in the medical field. As Participant 2 narrated,

“Doctors and nurses are not the only frontliners affected by the pandemic. Some of them wonder what the role of a medical social worker is, and they believe that social workers only work in DSWD. But they don’t know social workers are also in the medical field working as a frontliner.”

A social worker’s impact on their client, community, or nation deeply resonates beyond the initial interaction. It may reappear as a vital component during crisis situations in the future, like the recent pandemic (Matthews, 2020). Following the COVID-19 experience, medical social workers hope that the public will give more appreciation and attention to the profession for their service to the people. This is what Participant 3 hopes for.

“I hope that the people will also recognize medical social workers, apart from the typical social worker we see in DSWD or community workers, since the service we do here in the hospital is critical.”

Passion, Dedication, and Commitment to the Profession Keep Social Workers Going. Medical social workers believe that their service to the people must not end. Despite the challenges during the pandemic, social workers will continue serving the public earnestly in the future. Participant 4 expressed,

“Passion is for a social worker and for the profession, D for dedication to my career, and C for compassion and commitment as a Medical Social Worker.”

Participant 5 added, *“Putting the Social Work profession in my heart rather than my mind makes me realize how valuable my work is to the clients.”*

In spite of the medical social workers’ best efforts, the virus continued to spread and impact the workers’ well-being well into 2022. Nevertheless, amidst the rapid changes and uncertainty, most medical social workers were able to turn challenges into new opportunities for service during the pandemic. With a mission to “enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people” (NASW, 2022), medical social work is genuinely a profession rooted in its oath of service.

Unity among Social Workers from Different Fields must be Strengthened. Based on the findings, despite social workers from different fields having different work conditions and expertise, working alongside one another in the middle of a pandemic brought them closer

together. Thus, the differences in terms of experiences and challenges should ideally serve as a unifying factor for all those in the social work profession. Participant 4 voiced this hope,

“The coordination and respect in the other field of social work. I hope the relationship we build with them while working on this pandemic will be strengthened, and we will be more united even after this crisis. I expect there will be no more selfish times when working with other social workers in different fields.”

Frontline medical workers endured unprecedented stressors because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the light of these constraints, unity has become both more crucial and more challenging. Fortunately, various cases of naturally transpiring assistance appeared at medical institutions, including situations in which people made the effort to operate together during the crisis who may not have done so under ‘natural’ conditions (Matthews, 2020). Medical social workers are looking forward to the continuity of this strengthened relationship with the other fields of social work.

The themes that emerged in this study revolved around the coping strategies of medical social workers as related to the Cognitive Development Theory by Vygotsky (2015), which highlights that a support system, self-care, and other pleasant activities will help workers have lower anxiety levels. The social connection is therefore deemed essential to help enhance physical, mental, and social well-being. For when workers feel socially connected, it will create positive emotions and satisfaction—and in the case of the medical social work profession, a more empowered, efficient, and committed force to bolster the frontlines in future crises.

Conclusion

As the Philippines continues to be vigilant in its battle against the deadly COVID-19 virus, medical social workers on the frontline stationed in COVID-dedicated hospitals remain steadfast in their commitment to providing frontline services to patients and their families despite the continuing health and safety risks involved.

Going through this crisis was indeed not easy for all who have endured it. The lives of medical social workers were drastically changed due to forced isolation from their families and friends, shifts in their living arrangements, and being exposed to the severe physical and mental toll of working amidst this disease. However, despite these risks and the fear surrounding their job, medical social workers continued to render their services.

In the face of all the challenges brought on by the pandemic, medical social workers urge the public to not let down their guard concerning possible future health crises. People must stop downplaying the COVID-19 situation and other potential health risks to the point of calling it a conspiracy, saying this is all a scam. The medical social workers who, with their valiant efforts, continue to contribute and fulfill their mandate have shown how significant the profession is in serving the country.

The researchers of this study discovered how demanding it is to work in such a complex job, as evidenced in the results. The bravery and enthusiasm of the study participants can serve as both an inspiration and a mirror for the future careers of social workers. Hearing about

their experiences and struggles made the researchers realize just how dire the situation was during the pandemic, with the strong likelihood that the situation would have been more chaotic without the valiant stand of the frontline soldiers. They hope for the public as well as the national government to recognize and appreciate the efforts of medical social workers, who do not deserve to risk their lives while receiving only a meager reward and struggling to overcome their challenges by employing a variety of coping strategies.

This study provides a deeper and more precise understanding of the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of medical social workers working on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic—as well as insights on the future of this profession. Using phenomenological analysis to understand the medical social workers' lived experiences, the interesting, shared accounts of the five medical social workers in this study can undoubtedly inspire future researchers to delve into the needs and prospects of the social work profession going forward. The researchers hope that this study becomes a wakeup call for policymakers and healthcare administrations to craft and implement programs that can help address medical social workers' well-being amidst possible future global health crises.

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