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Palenčárová J.[1,2], Jankelová N.[1,2], Jankelová N.[1], Kročková S.[2]

Importance of Social Workers in Digital Hospital

[1] Slovak Medical University, Bratislava, Slovakia
[2] Penta Hospitals, Bratislava, Slovakia

Паленчарова Я.[1,2], Янкелова Н.[1,2], Янкелова Н.[1], Крочкова С.[2]

Важливість соціальних працівників у цифровій лікарні

[1] Словацький медичний університет, м. Братислава, Словаччина
[2] Penta Hospitals, м. Братислава, Словаччина

jana.palencarova@szu.sk

Introduction

Healthcare is a key issue for most governments in Europe, and its importance is growing with ageing population and predictions of increased need, and hence costs, for healthcare. Social work is an essential component of inpatient healthcare delivery due to the social dimension for patients and their families as well as the impact on the cost of healthcare delivery by reducing length of hospital stay [1], mortality, readmission rate and utilisation rate [2]. At the same time, all components of the healthcare system, including social work, are facing the impacts of the digital industrial revolution, known as Industrial Revolution 4.0 [3]. Healthcare costs are rising globally, putting downward pressure on the number of social workers [4], and it is the incorporation of digital tools that can increase their work efficiency.

Little work has been done on the changes in the work of social workers in hospitals as a result of Industry 4.0 digital tools. Exploring this topic is important firstly in terms of further developing social work as scientific discipline, secondly in terms of setting up social work education [5] and thirdly in terms of actively integrating digital era 4.0 tools into the work of social workers to improve the healthcare provided and to reduce the healthcare costs incurred.

The development of social work as scientific discipline does not ignore the impact of the digitalization in 4.0 era [evidence in 6; 7; 8], however the idea of the replacement of social work by digital tools needs to be further explored.

The paper contributes to the growing literature on digitalisation in healthcare and work changes resulting from digital era 4.0. It seeks to answer the question of the future of social work in hospitals – whether and to what extent social work will be replaced by digital era 4.0 technologies.

Specifics of social work in hospitals

Social work is a practical profession and a scientific discipline that promotes social change and social cohesion, rights and freedom of people [9]. Social work in healthcare is part of the nursing process and is based on a holistic approach to person. The work of social workers in hospitals has been established worldwide for more than 100 years [10]. The breadth and sensitivity of this role is often difficult to clearly define [11; 12; 13]. It usually involves a diverse range of tasks including discharge planning, assisting with paperwork and benefits, dealing with shelter issues, arranging home nursing care, liaising with agencies and organisations, social counselling for family and mental health problems. Efficient discharge planning is an important component of the financially necessary "fast in and out" patient flow [1]. The fast-paced nature of the work, the multidisciplinary context, the highly stressful environment and increasing pressures on hospital bed capacity, the need to attend to patients' discharge as quickly as possible are factors changing the traditional role of the social worker in the hospital setting [11; 14; 15].

Healthcare 4.0

Health 4.0 is an umbrella term for data-driven digital health technologies such as smart, mobile, wireless, electronic or online health, medical IT, telemedicine, digital medicine, health informatics, electronic health record systems, genomics, remote diagnostics, wireless technologies, context-aware computing, cellular technologies, etc. [16; 17]. It describes digital frontiers and disruptive innovations in the healthcare sector that are creating new business models and value networks [18], new forms of collaboration between different technology professionals and health and social care providers, the complex use of collected patient data for the benefit of the patient [16; 19], the globalization of healthcare delivery [17], but also occupational changes [8].

Despite concerns that the overuse of digital communication may undermine the trust relationship between social worker and client a meta-analysis of sources confirmed that digital communication is rather instrumental in the relationship [6]. Although full use of tools 4.0. can contribute to better and more cost-effective [20], on the other hand, we need to eliminate the risks of improper use of digital technologies – disinformation, data security leaks and dependence of vulnerable or non-IT native groups [3; 21].

Digital hospital 4.0

The 4.0 era is impacting healthcare in two main ways – it is impacting both the way healthcare is delivered and the way healthcare facilities are managed, with the greatest impact seen in hospitals [22], which are the most complex and largest healthcare facilities [23]. Some authors consider the concept of hospital 4.0, smart or digital hospital, to be limited to the digitalisation of existing hospital processes [24]. However, the concept is broader, ranging from the use of technological innovations such as the Internet of Things (neurostimulators for the deep brain, insulin pumps), artificial intelligence in (precision diagnostics e.g. in pathology, software for transcribing medical records), telemedicine, wearable technologies (biosensors, smart watches), mobile healthcare to process and service improvement (a central pharmacy preparing medications for patients in the hospital by a robot). In addition, we are currently witnessing a trend directly impacting work of hospital social workers – healthcare is moving out of the acute care setting and into the home or post-acute setting to help patients feel more comfortable and get the best healthcare solutions through IoT technology that activates diverse ways to manage patients' health more efficiently [25].

Era 4.0 and the work of social workers

Social workers in the digital hospitals 4.0 have access to up-to-date online information about social benefits, social devices and aids, as well as comprehensive patient data in the hospital information system (HIS). Resource Coordination and Referral Assistance is becoming available online, as AI-driven platforms can match patients with community resources, such as housing programs, food assistance, and mental health services and automated referral systems streamline the process of connecting patients to support networks. Patients and their family members can be advised by social workers on 4.0 innovations that improve their quality of life, such as remote care applications (home sensors with AI capabilities), data transferring tools (vital functions IoT), or telehealth opportunities. At the same time, telemedicine and online counselling also enable social workers to provide support remotely [3].

Social workers in hospitals are vital for enhanced patient experience – in the era of technology and digitalisation, human care and sincere concern for the patient are still healing. Social workers often cover the area of volunteering in hospitals, which also brings the human touch and enhances the patient experience. For example, at the new tertiary digital hospital, Hospital Bory in Slovakia, social workers manage and support 50 active hospital volunteers.

The main aim of our research is to identify the impact of technology 4.0 on the work of hospital social workers in providing information and linking patients to social services. The impact of digitalisation is that information usually provided by social workers, such as social benefits information, compensatory aids or information about places in social care facilities is now days available online for patients and the public. In our paper, we aim to find out whether the digital availability of information has changed the meaning of social workers' work for patients.

Object, materials and research methods

Based on the above analysis of the current state of knowledge on this topic, our research questions are as follows:

How important is the work of social workers in the digital hospital of the 4.0 era for patients?

How easy is it for a patient to find out the information provided by social workers on the internet?

What does a social worker mean to a patient? (What does the patient associate the social worker with?)

We argue that the work of social workers is important for patients (research question 1), that it is changing due to the impact of digital technologies (research question 2), but that technology will only complement and change but not replace it (research questions 3).

Our research was conducted by questionnaire among patients of the inpatient part of the new tertiary Hospital Bory in Bratislava, Slovakia during February 2025.

Bory Hospital opened in 2023 as a de novo hospital (i.e. it is not just a new building, but the creation of a completely new healthcare entity). The hospital incorporates technological and process elements of the 4.0 era such as comprehensive hospital information system (HIS), automated central pharmacy, two surgical robots (Da Vinci and Rosa), simulation learning facilities, process innovations such as "floating bed" wards (wards with several specialisations), etc. The patients involved in the survey were hospitalized in the "floating bed" wards, which due to its single bedrooms allows high occupancy rates, low average length of stay and efficiency while maintaining a high hygienic and epidemiological standard. Team of social workers taking care of patients consists in Hospital Bory of 4 colleagues, who take care for patients on inpatient section, intensive care, obstetrics and emergency unit. Social workers have access to the Hospital Bory information system, are digitally skilled and have computer equipment (laptops) at their disposal. They all receive continuous training both internally (HIS, processes, communication standards, health information) and externally.

68 patients with various diagnoses in orthopaedics, traumatology, surgery, neurosurgery, neurology and internal medicine participated in the anonymous research. The sample of 68 respondents consisted of 35 men and 33 women. The average age was 65, and the median age was 69. The youngest patient involved was aged 24, the oldest 97. The average length of stay of patients from the sample in the hospital was 4.34 days, median 2 days, minimum 1 day and maximum 31 days.

Scaled questions were used in the research using Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 – unimportant – 5 highly important; 1– very difficult, 5 – easily.

The questionnaire consisted of the following 3 questions:

1. How important is the work of social workers to you?

2. How easy is it for you to find out information provided by social workers on the Internet?

3. What does a social worker mean to you – complete the sentence: A) provided me with information (e.g. about eligibility for compensatory aids, social benefits, etc.); B) gave me advice (e.g. on how to go about filling in forms); C) arranged social assistance for me (e.g. placement in a social services home, etc.); D) listened to me.

Data processing. Data processing, organization, and preliminary evaluation of the dataset were conducted using Microsoft Excel software.

Research results

In the first research question, all respondents considered the work of social workers to be important to them – see the Fig. 1. Up to 84 % (67 respondents) of all respondents considered it very important to themselves. Men were slightly more likely to rate the work of social workers as very important – 86 % of all men versus 82 % of all women. All patients hospitalized for more than 4.34 days (i.e. the sample average) considered the work of social workers to be very important (100 %), which indicates increase of importance of social workers to patients increased with the length of hospitalization.

In the second research question, we investigated the extent to which patients can search online the social information provided by social workers.

Fig. 2 shows that two thirds of patients found it difficult or very difficult to find out the information they needed themselves online. 23 respondents which means 34 % of all respondents found it difficult and another 34 % found it very difficult to find information independently. 18 respondents which means 26 % of all respondents rated the difficulty as average and only 4 respondents which means 6 % found it easy to access the social information they needed.

Fig. 3 reports that middle-aged patients (41–60 years old) are the most confident in finding information independently. As many as 17 % of them think that they will independently obtain information rather easy, 56 % moderately and only 28 % rather difficult. This belief declines rapidly with advancing age. In the 61+ age category, 82 % think it is rather or very difficult to get information independently. All patients 81 years old or older find it rather or very difficult to obtain social information online.

Surprisingly, younger patients (21–40 years) who are digitally native did not find it very easy to access social information (0 responses). Responses of rather easy to

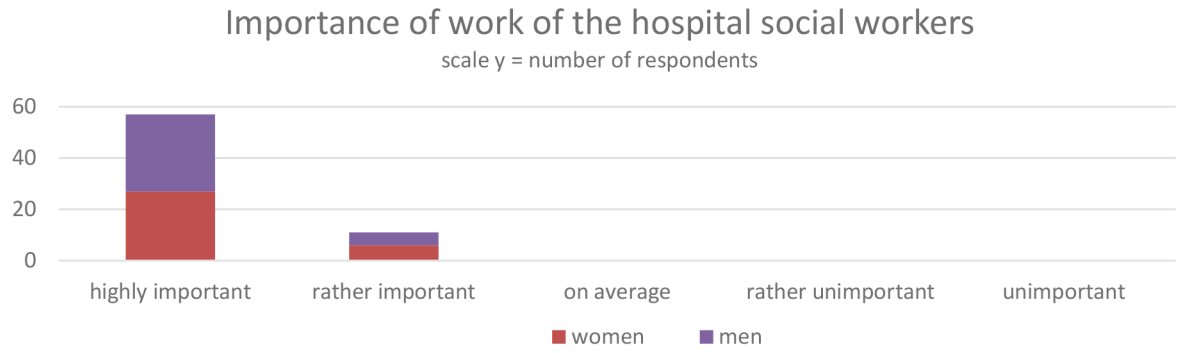

Fig. 1. The importance of social workers' work in digital hospital 4.0

Source: author's own processing

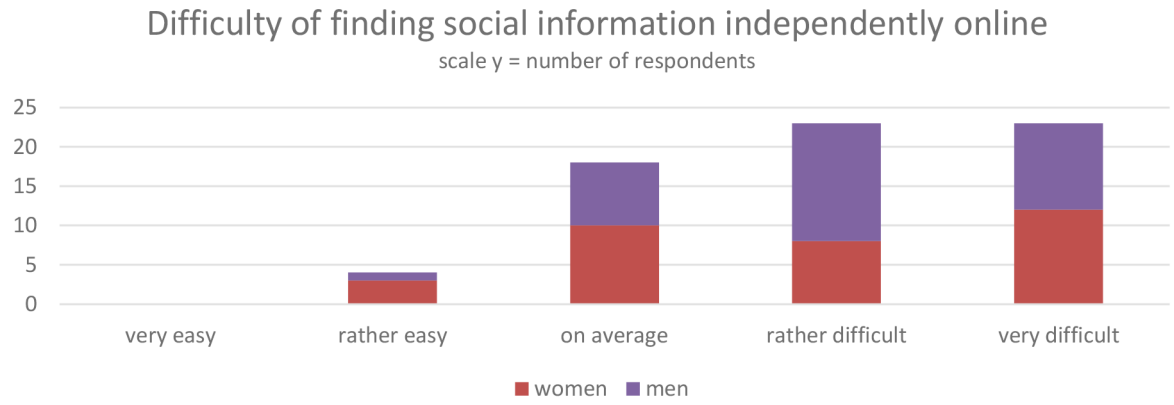

Fig. 2. Difficulty of patients independently accessing social information

Source: author's own processing

very difficult occurred in approximately equal proportions. This may be due to the medical condition these patients were in. The finding suggests, that weakened, sick person, although digitally savvy, seeks support and information from people, not just technology. Thus, the ability to retrieve information independently did not correlate with the young age of the respondents, which is a prerequisite for digital nativeness.

In the third research question, we investigated with what help patients associate the social worker with. Most often the social worker provided information (38 %) and then listened to the patient (32 %). In 18 % she provided social support and in 17 % advised otherwise (Fig. 4).

The provision of information was reported by all age groups with approximately equal frequency, and this was regardless of whether patients were able to obtain information online themselves. Listening to the patient and having personal social contact – was valued by all age groups, with a slight decrease in the very oldest age group over 80 years.

Discussion of research results

Our research has shown that the work of hospital social workers is important for patients also in the digital hospital (84 % of respondents).

The research further demonstrated that the digital 4.0 era has helped some patients to be independent in obtaining available information about social benefits (6 % rather easy to independently obtain information and 26 % with moderate difficulty). This is slowly changing the way and content of social workers' work in hospitals but is not currently causing groundbreaking changes and the demise of the profession. In fact, research in the digital hospital of the 4.0 era has also shown that, regardless of age, patients perceive the social worker as someone who not only provides them with information and advice, but more importantly, takes the time to listen to them (the second most common association with the term social worker among patients). Humanity and sincere concern for the patient is so far only minimally replaceable by current technologies of the 4.0 era. Our research finding is in line with the Pascoe et al. [26] state, that IT is intended to streamline processes and reduce the administrative burden on social workers so that they can attend to their core role in the hospital setting.

However, for social workers to be able to fulfil their tasks also in the 4.0 era, their digital literacy and information literacy on digital tools of the 4.0 era available to their social clients is essential. The results of our research are in line with the findings of other studies, such as Davidson et al. [13] on the need to strengthen these skills.

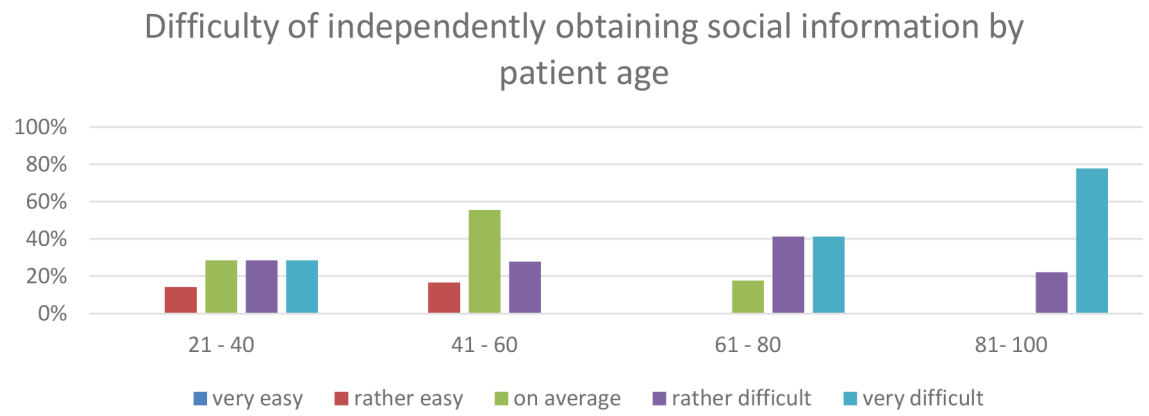

Fig. 3. Difficulty of independently obtaining social information by patient age

Source: author's own processing

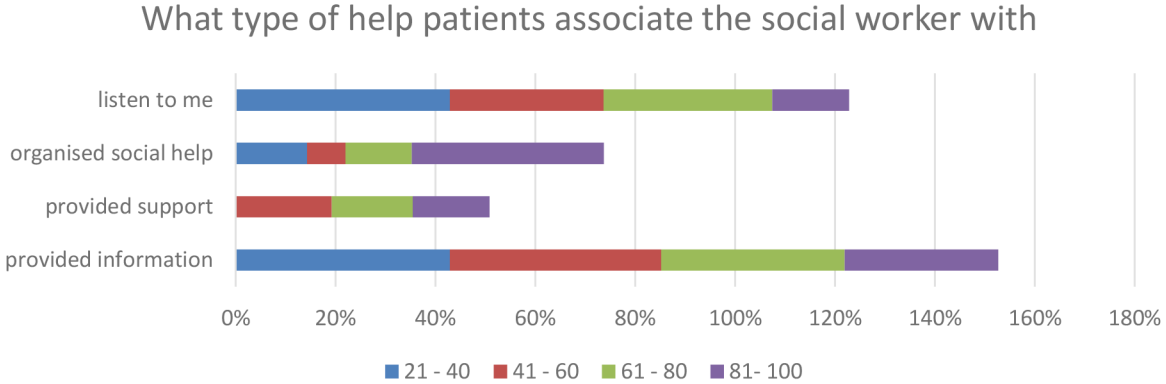

Fig. 4. Form of social worker's assistance to the patient in the digital hospital

Source: author's own processing

To achieve the above, we define several steps as necessary. Firstly, both academic education and subsequent continuing education institutions should actively supplement their curriculums with new information and produce digitally and informationally literate graduates. The regulator (the state) and employers need to define the different components of the work of social workers (information administration, social assistance, social contact,…) and identify tasks that will be affected and changed by digitalization and those that will remain untouched. The updated content of the hospital social work then defines the need for new skills and competences to be included in the training programmes at universities and in the internal training plans of employers. The topic of digital skills should be part of the entire employee learning cycle – present from vocational training, through induction on-the-job training to lifelong continuous learning, and include not only hard IT skills, but also digital safety, digital ethics and standards of communication in the digital space.

Secondly, employers have an important role to play in setting standards and processes in hospitals so that they already incorporate the tools of the digital 4.0 era. Social workers should be able to access and actively work with data from the HIS, using AI to triage and prioritize patients. The use of laptops will allow social workers at the patient's bedside to show the patient's family members or the patient social capabilities and aids such as IoT solutions or telehealth solutions for home care of patients discharged from hospital.

Thirdly, it is desirable for public health organisations, healthcare suppliers, social workers and others to actively educate patients about the existence and the use of digital tools, as digital transformation reduces inequalities in access to healthcare services, especially for remote and underserved communities and progressively empowers patients [27].

People with limited access to digital technologies and insufficient digital skills may be less likely to use online healthcare services or even be unaware of their existence. This is where we see the content of social workers' work shifting as result of the digital 4.0 era – to promote equity and accessibility of healthcare social services to all groups.

Key finding of our paper is fact, that despite the availability of patient information online, the importance of social workers remains. Patients continue to turn to social workers with questions about social assistance, offices, aids, benefits, but they also look to them for a social partner to listen to them. The digital tools of the 4.0 era that will facilitate the information component of social workers' work must be complemented and balanced by the human approach of social workers. From the above, we can induce that the use of digital tools in other areas – for example, in the management process of the manager towards employees, of medical staff towards patients when administering medication via the drug robot – needs to be equally balanced by a human approach in the digital 4.0 era.

The contribution of our paper to theory is the confirmation of changes in the work of social workers due to the impact of digital technologies. Patients are partly able to search for information provided by the social worker on their own. However, the rate at which patients respond to the ability to look up social information online is slower than the increase in available technology. Two thirds of patients find it difficult or very difficult to find out the information they need themselves. Even younger digital native patients reported only a partial ability to find information independently, which may have been due to the health condition they were in. Meanwhile, the weakened, sick person, although digitally savvy, is looking for support and information from people, not just technology.

The contribution of our paper to practice is to confirm the need for social workers to be digitally proficient at a time when their patients are digitally literate and able to look up information online. For practice, this means that educational institutions as well as employers need to update their competency schemes and educational curriculums to include digital skills and information about digital tools.

Limitations of the study. The research sample included patients from only one hospital using era 4.0 technologies. The patients were from the inpatient ward of the hospital only – sample did not include emergency, abandoned neonates, or intensive care patients. Another limitation was the age composition of the patients – the inpatients were mostly older, i.e. not digital natives.

Prospects for further research

Future research should extend the present findings by examining larger and more heterogeneous patient populations across multiple healthcare institutions to enhance the external validity of the results. Particular attention should be devoted to differences between hospital departments and clinical contexts, where the role of social workers and the use of digital technologies may vary substantially. Further studies are also needed to explore how patients' health status interacts with digital literacy in shaping their ability to independently access social information. Finally, future research should investigate the effectiveness of specific digital tools used in social work practice and assess how the digital competencies of social workers influence patient support, information accessibility, and overall care outcomes.

Conclusions

Digital transformation is reshaping the healthcare system, reducing inequalities in access to care and progressively empowering patients. Patients' reliance on hospital social workers for information is declining, however hospital social workers are still their key social information source. What remains important is the ability of social workers to help and to give hope to patients and their families. They prove daily that their work is a mission full of meaning.

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Purpose. The study aims to examine the impact of digital technologies on the role and perceived importance of social workers. Specifically, it investigates whether the increasing online availability of social information has changed the significance of social workers for hospitalized patients.

Materials and methods. The research was conducted through a questionnaire survey among inpatients at a tertiary hospital in Slovakia, during February 2025. The sample consisted of 68 patients from several medical departments with an average age of 65 years. The questionnaire included scaled questions measured on a Likert scale and focused on the perceived importance of social workers, the ease of obtaining social information online, and patients' perceptions of social workers' roles. Data were processed and evaluated using Microsoft Excel.

Results. The findings show that social workers remain highly important for patients even in a digital hospital setting. A total of 84 % of respondents considered their work very important. Despite the growing availability of information online, two thirds of patients reported difficulty finding social information independently. The ability to access information decreased significantly with age, although even younger patients did not report consistently easy access. Patients most often associated social workers with providing information and emotional support, including listening and personal interaction.

Conclusions. The results indicate that digital technologies are changing but not replacing the work of hospital social workers. While digital tools facilitate information access and improve efficiency, the human, supportive, and relational aspects of social work remain essential for patient care.

Key words: healthcare, care, technologies, personnel, change.

Мета. Поточна цифрова трансформація, зумовлена концепцією Індустрії 4.0, суттєво змінює системи охорони здоров'я та переосмислює ролі медичних працівників. Цифрові лікарні дедалі активніше інтегрують такі технології, як лікарняні інформаційні системи, телемедицина, штучний інтелект та пристрої інтернету речей, з метою підвищення ефективності та якості медичної допомоги. Ці зміни впливають і на діяльність соціальних працівників у лікарнях, яка традиційно базується на міжособистісній взаємодії та цілісному підході до пацієнта. Метою цього дослідження є аналіз впливу цифровізації на роль, функції та сприйняття значущості соціальних працівників у цифровому лікарняному середовищі. Особлива увага приділяється тому, чи змінює зростаюча доступність соціальної інформації в інтернеті залежність пацієнтів від соціальних працівників та як пацієнти оцінюють їхню підтримку в умовах Health 4.0. Дослідження також прагне визначити, чи здатні цифрові інструменти частково замінити традиційні форми соціальної роботи або ж їх роль залишається допоміжною та доповнювальною.

Матеріали і методи. Дослідження було проведене з використанням кількісного підходу у формі анкетного опитування пацієнтів, госпіталізованих у лікарні Bory в Братиславі (Словаччина). Ця лікарня, відкрита у 2023 році, є сучасним медичним закладом, створеним за принципами Hospital 4.0, що передбачає впровадження комплексної інформаційної системи, роботизованої хірургії, автоматизованої аптеки та цифрово підтриманих процесів управління пацієнтами. Збір даних відбувався у лютому 2025 року серед пацієнтів стаціонарних відділень різних спеціалізацій. Вибірка складалася з 68 респондентів (35 чоловіків і 33 жінки) віком від 24 до 97 років, середній вік – 65 років. Анкета містила питання за шкалою Лайкерта, спрямовані на оцінку важливості соціальних працівників, складності отримання соціальної інформації онлайн та сприйняття ролі соціального працівника. Додатково оцінювалися форми допомоги, які пацієнти найчастіше пов'язують із соціальними працівниками, включно з інформаційною підтримкою, консультуванням та організацією соціальних послуг. Обробка та попередній аналіз даних здійснювалися за допомогою програми Microsoft Excel.

Результати. Отримані результати свідчать, що соціальні працівники залишаються надзвичайно важливими для пацієнтів навіть у високотехнологічному лікарняному середовищі. Переважна більшість респондентів (84 %) оцінили їхню роботу як дуже важливу, причому значущість зростала разом із тривалістю госпіталізації. Незважаючи на доступність інформації про соціальні пільги та послуги в інтернеті, приблизно дві третини пацієнтів відзначили, що самостійний пошук такої інформації є складним або дуже складним. Лише незначна частка респондентів вказала на легкість доступу до потрібної інформації. Було виявлено вікові відмінності: старші пацієнти значно частіше стикалися з труднощами, тоді як пацієнти середнього віку демонстрували дещо більшу впевненість. Водночас навіть молодші респонденти не відзначали стабільної легкості доступу, що може бути пов'язано зі станом здоров'я під час госпіталізації. Пацієнти найчастіше асоціювали соціальних працівників із наданням інформації, емоційною підтримкою, практичними порадами та допомогою в організації соціальних послуг, що підтверджує їхню комплексну та незамінну роль у системі догляду.

Висновки. Результати дослідження підтверджують, що цифрові технології змінюють, але не замінюють діяльність соціальних працівників у лікарнях. Хоча цифрові інструменти сприяють доступності інформації та підвищують ефективність процесів, вони не можуть замінити людський, емпатійний та комунікативний аспект соціальної роботи. Соціальні працівники залишаються ключовими посередниками між пацієнтами та складними соціальними системами, а також джерелом психологічної підтримки. Дослідження підкреслює необхідність розвитку цифрових компетенцій соціальних працівників для ефективного використання технологій зі збереженням людиноцентричного підходу. Важливим є також подальше впровадження освітніх програм, що поєднують цифрові навички й етичні принципи соціальної роботи. Загалом соціальна робота залишається невід'ємною складовою цифрових лікарень, доповнюючи технологічні інновації важливим людським виміром.

Ключові слова: охорона здоров'я, догляд, технології, персонал, зміна.

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Information about the authors

Palenčárová Jana – Ing., PhD., MBA, teacher at the Faculty of Public Health, Slovak Medical University, Bratislava, Slovakia; CHRO Penta Hospitals International, Slovakia.
jana.palencarova@szu.sk, ORCID ID: 0009-0005-1261-6632 [A, D]

Jankelová Naďa – MUDr., Mgr., MBA, postgraduate student at the Faculty of Public Health, Slovak Medical University, Bratislava, Slovakia; doctor at Bratislava Bory Hospital, Slovakia.
n.jankelova@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0009-0002-5979-6499 [B, E]

Jankelová Nadežda – Prof., Ing., PhD., MPH, teacher at the Faculty of Business Management, University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovakia.
nadezda.jankelova@szu.sk, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0045-4737 [C, F]

Kročková Slávka – PhDr., Social Worker at Bratislava Bory Hospital, Slovakia.
Slavka.krockova@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0009-0005-2100-8209 [B]

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