Caring for people with HIV and AIDS and their families: Social work response

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Abstract
This paper discusses the social work profession as a key player in caring for people who are HIV and AIDS and their families included. Social work is a profession which most people don’t value much when it comes to issues to do with HIV and AIDS. This is a profession which need to be taken on board if people who are infected and affected by HIV and AIDS are to be cared for effectively. As such the paper will try to show how important is social work is in caring of people with HIV and AIDS. The paper, focus on the role of social work in support, treatment and care for people who are HIV positive and for their families.

Introduction
People with HIV and AIDS can live healthy lives for longer if proper care and support is provided. The infected can cope much better if they are happy and feel productive. Emotional support and a positive attitude will help to avoid depression. A lot can also be done to avoid the devastating effects of illness and death has on families and children (Pact Zimbabwe, 2001).

Families and individuals cope with HIV/AIDS without much community support. In most cases, very few people know that someone is HIV positive and when they become ill, their families and children bear the burden alone. Children and partners also have to deal with the grief of watching a loved one suffer and die. Most families, who lost someone, spent quite considerable time nursing the person once they became seriously ill. Social work discipline plays an important role in addressing these shortcomings in treatment, support and caring of people with HIV and AIDS.

Definitions of key terms
Social work
Social work is a profession and discipline that seeks to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of an individual, group, or community by intervening through research, policy, community organizing, direct practice, and teaching on behalf of those afflicted with poverty or any real or perceived social injustices and violations of their human rights. Research is often focused on areas such as human development, social policy, public administration, psychotherapy, program evaluation, and international and community development (IFSW 2000).

HIV
HIV stands for human immuno-deficiency virus. This is the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). The virus destroys the human immune (defence) system, making the body vulnerable to other infections. When the virus enters the body, it binds itself to specific defence cells. As it enters the cells it destroys them. As more of these cells are destroyed, the body becomes too weak to defend itself against infections. The virus knows no gender, age, race, or religion. It can attack anyone and you cannot tell who has the virus just by looking at them. You might not even know that you have the virus, and this means you can transmit it to other people without knowing, (Jackson, 2002).

AIDS
AIDS stands for acquired immune deficiency syndrome. It is acquired because it is not inherited the virus that destroys the body’s immune system is spread from one person to another. A syndrome is a group of signs and symptoms denoting a disease, in this case, the collection of signs and symptoms resulting from lowered immunity due to HIV. As the virus multiplies and more immune cells are destroyed, many infections and complications occur. These infections are referred to as opportunistic
infections. They are called opportunistic because they take the opportunity provided by the lowered immunity, (Jackson, 2002).

Social work’s response;
Social work intervention in HIV and AIDS starts from counselling and testing where individuals will be provided with counselling that pre and post testing of people who would be coming for HIV testing. In pre-testing people would be counselled to accept the outcome of the results. In post-counselling people would be encouraged to survive positively with the virus if they are found to be HIV positive. If a person is negative social work is there to counsel the individual to remain negative. Once someone is pronounced HIV positive status any individual is likely to get shocked, become angry, get depressed and eventually die. Social work would provide counselling such that the individual will remain resolute in the face of the impending calamity befalling him or her.

Care
Illness and death of a breadwinner usually increases poverty. Poor people do not have the resources to provide proper care for someone with HIV/AIDS. In providing care for those who cannot care for themselves, the social worker through the knowledge and skills acquired would set up community-based programs which deliver better care and support for people with HIV/AIDS. There are a number of activities that can be done:

- Organise counselling and emotional support for people with HIV/AIDS and their families.
- Set up organisations that bring together people living with HIV/AIDS to fight for change.
- Set up wellness programmes and medical treatment to help people keep their immune systems strong and fight opportunistic infections.
- Organise grants, food parcels and poverty alleviation projects to help families survive.
- Provide home-based care and medical treatment for people who are ill.

It is very important to deal with all the things listed above. Counselling without nutrition will not keep someone alive. Clinic treatment without home-based care will not provide for people once they are bedridden.

It is important to target people living with HIV and AIDS and their families for support. The families have to look after and support the person with HIV/AIDS, they themselves need emotional support. They also have to deal with prejudice from the community and need information and training so that they can protect themselves and provide better care. The community at large also need to be educated about the need to embrace people living with HIV and AIDS. Outreach programmes can be organised at community level. All community gatherings can be taken advantage of and educate the gathering on issues to do with HIV and AIDS, stigma and discrimination and other relevant information which work in favour of the infected and affected.

Programmes and support must be all deserving members of the community irrespective of HIV status. For example, home-based care should target all people who are bedridden. Programmes to support orphans should target all children in need. Poverty alleviation and state grants should target all who need it, by this people living with HIV and AIDS and the services won’t be stigmatised. There should be no exclusion of beneficiaries in a programme.

Emotional support
The stigma makes it difficult for people with HIV and AIDS and for their families to live a normal life. Loneliness, anxiety and depression make people sicker and more vulnerable when their immune systems are weak. Families cannot support and care for someone who is ill if they themselves are depressed and scared.

It is important to also focus on emotional support for people who have HIV or who are not yet bedridden. It is often best to organise people into groups or support groups where they can share their experiences and feelings with other people in similar situations.

Family members who are looking after people who are ill also need support and where possible support groups should be set up for children who are coping with death and dying.
Support groups do the following types of things:

- Organise meetings where people with HIV/AIDS can get together and discuss their feelings, common problems and ways of coping.
- Teach people how to look after themselves and discuss symptoms, illnesses and treatment.
- Organise social events where people can be open about their status and relax with each other.
- Organise talks and presentations from experts.

**For families, support groups can be used to:**

- Teach people about HIV/AIDS and how to care for someone when they get ill
- Talk about feelings and give families emotional support to help them cope with emotional stress.
- Help families to get access to government grants and relief.
- Put them in touch with services and projects that can help i.e. like home-based care.

Support groups are not the only way of organising support. It is very important for people to get individual help with their problems and to feel that the community accepts and cares for them.

Social workers can act as a referral system, people can be referred to different organisation for assistance hence the need to have wide knowledge about resources available in a particular community. There is also need for a wide networking which enables people living with HIV and AIDS to get assistance required all the time. There is need to make sure that counsellors are available at clinics and advice offices to give people emotional counselling and practical advice about their problems.

Local leaders like politicians, community leaders, sport stars, traditional leaders, business people, among others, should be open about HIV/AIDS. This will go a long way in alleviate stigma and discrimination since role models will be coming out opening about their status. People also should be mobilise to volunteer and help in projects and should publicly support any people who are open about being HIV positive. This will help to make people with HIV/AIDS and their families feel that they are accepted and supported by their community.

**Staying healthy – wellness programmes**

Medical treatment is not the only way to stay healthy. If you are HIV positive, it is very important to keep your immune system as strong as possible. This will help in fighting diseases and infections. Food, exercise and lifestyle are all important.

**Here are some of the things which should be done:**

- Educate people with HIV/AIDS and their families about healthy eating.
- Start vegetable garden projects to help provide the right food types to people who cannot afford them.
- Start food projects that collect food from supermarkets and farmers and distribute it to people who need it.

**Keeping a healthy body**

People living with HIV or AIDS need different foods from healthy people. HIV/AIDS and the medicines people have to take can make someone lose a lot of weight, feel cold all the time and get serious stomach problems. This will make you weaker and more vulnerable to serious infections. Because someone easily get infections, it is also very important to clean and cook food properly and to drink only clean water. Social workers network with nutritionist for the benefit of their clients. This is so because social workers are on the ground as compared to nutritionists. Social work need to network and maintain these networks for the benefits of the clients. Teamwork with different profession is good for the betterment of clients. There is need of teamwork with other health professions who are helpful to HIV and AIDS people. Below are some of the things people with HIV and AIDS need to do and avoid, (Island Hospice Service, 2007)

**Good food**

- Drink two litres of water a day
- Drink sour milk, milk or yoghurt
Eat beans, lentils, eggs or meat every day if you can – beans are just as good as meat if you put a tablespoon of uncooked sunflower oil with it before serving. All vegetables and fruits are very good.

For a healthy stomach, eat raw garlic, raw carrots or dried pumpkin seeds.

Eat a lot of grains and starch – maize, rice, sorghum, brown bread.

Bad foods

Sugar is very bad for the immune system and causes stomach problems.
Fried foods and cooked oils stop the stomach from being able to digest food.
Spicy food can also cause stomach upsets – do not eat too much.

Do:

Keep yourself occupied and interested in things to avoid depression.
Try to exercise without straining yourself.
Get enough sleep and rest.
Find people you can talk to about your feelings.

Do not:

Smoke, drink or use addictive drugs.
Go on diet or lose too much weight.

Social workers are an important part of the medical team which comprise doctors, nurses. People who live in poverty will find it very hard to stay healthy. Social work has to make sure that poor people get access to food programmes, government grants and other poverty alleviation projects.

It is very important that people with AIDS do not get too much stress and that you feel good about yourself and your life. It helps to stay active and not become bed-ridden or depressed. Any kind of activity is good – limited exercise, gardening, social activities and sports’ groups. People should obviously work for as long as possible as this will also help you to feel good about yourself. Emotional support is vital and people who cannot talk to anyone else about their condition will definitely become ill more quickly.

Government support and grants

People with HIV/AIDS and their families can get support from the government in a number of ways. Some grants are only available to people who are poor. Social workers are the best people to get help from if someone needs government support.

Poverty alleviation/ economic strengthening/ livelihood promotion.

Keep employment
One of the most important ways of stopping people who are affected by AIDS from becoming impoverished because of the disease is to make sure that those who are working can stay in employment. This means that employed family members should not stay at home to look after people who are ill unless this is unavoidable. People with AIDS should be encouraged to work as long as possible.

Income creation
Micro-lending projects should be encouraged for affected families to help them launch a small business or enterprise from the home. The micro-lending projects should be properly run and supported and not be the same as micro-loans that you get at huge interest and which further impoverish people.

An important part of poverty relief is food, clothing and material assistance. The proper distribution of materials needs good coordination, (Reseau Afrique, 2000).

Medical treatment
Social workers on the ground need to encourage people living with HIV and AIDS to seek medical treatment in time. People who are getting ill from AIDS should be encouraged to take broad-spectrum antibiotics to prevent things like lung infections that can easily kill people with weakened immune systems.
systems. Opportunistic infections, like thrush and gastro should be treated. Any sexually transmitted infections should be treated early, Jackson, 2002).

When someone is on ARV, social workers need to advice those who will be taking the drugs to adhere to their medication. This is so because failure to do so is harmful to the individual’s health. The virus load to remain suppressed all the time. Relatives and friends need to be educated on the need of assisting and reminding their fellow member to take his or her drugs as required all the time, (Africaid, 2011).

**Dealing with death**

It is very important to make sure that people that are ill and are likely to die die peaceful, properly and in a dignified way. Before dying they need to plan for the future of their loved ones. This will help them not to worry too much about what will happen to their children and their families after they have gone. They should do the following kinds of things:

- Identify guardians from among their family or friends who will look after their children
- Write wills to ensure that their land or belongings are passed onto their children;
- Sort out any bank accounts or insurances to make sure that they will pass easily to the people that will need it;
- Create a memory box for their children. This includes things like family photographs, important documents like letters. Many people whose children are still small, also want to write a letter for the children to read when they are bigger that tells them what they feel about their children, what their dreams are for them and how much they care about them.
- Efforts should also be made to ensure that people spend their last days in comfort, in familiar surroundings and with the people they love. This will help them to die with dignity.
- Funerals can be very expensive and many people cannot really afford to bury their loved ones. Try to find ways to make funerals more affordable and organise community assistance.

**Dealing with children.**

Children of the parents who will be HIV and AIDS face a number of challenges which need attention of social workers. In most cases these children will be caring of their parents whilst they would be in need of care of their parents. Social work would like to counsel these children since they would be stressed up with the Caring work. Some would drop out of school to care for their parents, (Kubler-Ross, 1990). There is need of looking for alternative person within the family who would look after the child whilst the child in question attends school. There will be need of providing psychosocial support to these children. At times there is need of linking these children with much needed resources. There is need of inclusion of children in illness, death and dying issues. This is so because children are excluded in issues affecting their beloved ones, (Kubler-Ross, 1990).

**Conclusion**

This paper has given some definitions of key words and various possible response of social work has been articulated. It has been pointed out that a person need to be psychologically stable for any other treatment to be of any use. A troubled mind will not help in the treatment of the physical pain. People around the sick need to have the love and passion for their sick relative. The dying need assurance that his or children, parents, wife or husband will be safe after they are gone.

In conclusion i would to say HIV and AIDS agony is with us for a long time to come. Although the gospel of St John predicts that “the poor and the sick will be with us always,” we must not abandon them. Social work profession is the only hope in this cruel world. Social work must become more aggressive and more adventures and fight its place in Zimbabwe as champions of care for the people with HIV and AIDS and their families.
References