Social Workers as Patient Navigators:
A Review of the Literature

• Patient navigation is an intervention with the goal of helping individuals overcome barriers to timely diagnosis, treatment of medical conditions, and other health care (Freeman & Rodriguez, 2011)

• Patient navigators can reduce health disparities and improve patient outcomes (Battaglia et al., 2011)

• The Affordable Care Act (2010) emphasizes and expands the patient navigator role, so there is an opportunity for SW to be leaders

(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)
Patient Navigator Tasks

- Work to eliminate concrete barriers to health outcomes
  - like transportation, insurance, and appointment coordination (Jean-Pierre et al., 2011)

- Relationship with patient and family members
  - communication with community agencies
  - helping patients address fears or other barriers to seeking treatment
  - explaining medical procedures and regimes (Jean-Pierre et al., 2011)

- Provide emotional support and encouragement to patients and their families (Jean-Pierre et al., 2011)

- Respect patient culture and self-determination (Jean-Pierre et al., 2011)

(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)
Goals

- Assess past performance and current status of social work in the field of patient navigation
  - Level of involvement
  - Effectiveness

- Outline ways that social workers can have more of a presence as patient navigators in the next era of health care delivery

(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)
Methods

• There were 4,956 citations found in databases, archives of 10 journals, and gray literature, all published between 1990 (creation of patient navigation) and March 2014

• Excluded:
  ▪ articles that did not pertain to patient navigation and social work
  ▪ articles that did not include social workers actually performing or supervising navigation
  ▪ articles that were only conceptual, articles focusing on the creation of a program
  ▪ articles that discussed project where social workers were not used as navigators
  ▪ articles where the social work role was not defined
  ▪ articles that did not discuss the results

• Ultimately 18 publications met criteria

(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)
Findings: Role of Social Work

- Social workers provided patient navigation in 13 of the 18 articles

- 4 of these included examples of both social workers that provided direct navigation, and social workers that supervised or trained patient navigators

(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)
Findings: Social Workers’ Patient Navigation Tasks

- Linked patients to community resources
- Offered emotional support to patients and family members
- Enhanced communication between physicians and patients
- Referred patients for counseling
- Helped patients get insurance coverage

(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)
Findings: Social Workers’ Patient Navigator Supervisor and Trainer Tasks

• In addition to performing patient navigation, social workers often trained, mentored, and supervised navigators

• Served as liaison between patient navigators and case managers

(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)
Findings: Populations Served

• Variety of settings  
  ▪ oncology clinics  
  ▪ safety net clinics and hospitals  
  ▪ federally qualified health centers  
  ▪ one primary care office

• Exclusively low-income

• Majority focused on patients with abnormal cancer screening or cancer diagnosis

• Also a few on diabetes or various diagnoses

(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)
Findings: Study Results

- All studies demonstrated improvements in patient outcomes when social workers acted as patient navigators
  - Greater adherence to medical treatments
  - higher satisfaction,
  - lower health care costs
  - increased emotional well-being
  - shorter times to diagnosis
  - less anxiety

(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)
Implications for Practice

• Studies showed that using SWs as patient navigators can have a positive impact on clients

• ACA health care is striving to do a better job of coordination care—can be enhanced by navigation

• Social workers need to be proactive in establishing expertise (Institute for Alternative Futures, 2011)

• We must claim patient navigation as a social work domain to ensure continued relevance

(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)
References


(Browne, Savage, & Brown 2014)