

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR HEALTH SERVICE USERS AT A SECONDARY-CARE INSTITUTION

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To describe the level of social support perceived by users of a second-level health service. **Method:** This was a descriptive study with 287 users of health services in the state of Durango, Mexico, using the Social Support Scale in Health to collect data and SPSS software to analyze the results.

**Results:** The outpatients perceived more social support from nursing staff than from physicians and social workers, with a mean of 10.70, 10.19, 9.58, respectively; with a  $p < 0.05$  significant difference. **Conclusion:** Nursing professionals provide health service users with the greatest social support, answering their questions and allowing them to express their feelings.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Social Support; Nursing; Medical Staff; Social Workers; Patients.

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## SUORTE SOCIAL PARA USUÁRIOS DE SERVIÇOS DE SAÚDE EM UMA INSTITUIÇÃO DE ATENÇÃO SECUNDÁRIA

### RESUMO

*Objetivo:* Descrever o nível de suporte social percebido por usuários de serviços de atenção secundária.

*Método:* Estudo descritivo com uma amostra de 287 usuários de serviços de saúde do estado de Durango, México, aplicando a Escala de Suporte Social de Saúde, e utilizando o programa SPSS para a análise de resultados.

*Resultados:* Os usuários ambulatoriais do hospital perceberam maior suporte por parte da equipe de enfermagem quando comparado aos médicos e assistentes sociais, com uma média de  $M=10,70$ ,  $10,19$ , e  $9,58$ , respectivamente; e com uma diferença significativa de  $p<0,05$ .  
*Conclusão:* A equipe de enfermagem fornece mais suporte social aos usuários dos serviços de saúde, respondendo às perguntas que são feitas e permitindo aos pacientes que expressem seus sentimentos.

**DESCRITORES:** Apoio Social; Enfermagem; Corpo Clínico; Assistentes Sociais; Pacientes.

## SOPORTE SOCIAL EN USUARIOS DE LOS SERVICIOS DE SALUD EN UNA INSTITUCION DE SEGUNDO NIVEL

### RESUMEN

*Objetivo:* describir el nivel del soporte social percibido por los usuarios de los servicios de salud de segundo nivel.

*Método:* estudio descriptivo, con una muestra de 287 usuarios de los servicios de salud del estado de Durango, México, aplicando la Escala de Soporte Social de Salud, utilizando en programa SPSS para el análisis de resultados.

*Resultados:* se encontró que el usuario de la consulta externa del hospital, percibe mayor soporte social por parte del personal de enfermería en comparación con el médico y trabajo social, presentando una media de ( $M=10.70$ ,  $10.19$ ,  $9.58$ ) respectivamente; con una diferencia significativa de  $p<0.05$ .

*Conclusión:* es el personal de enfermería el que brinda mayor soporte social a los usuarios de los servicios de salud, resolviendo cada una de las dudas que se les presenten y permitiéndoles expresar sus sentimientos.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Apoyo Social; Enfermería; Cuerpo Médico; Trabajadores Sociales; Pacientes.

## INTRODUCTION

Social support can be defined as the existence or availability of people who can be trusted, who display concern for someone, and who express value and appreciation<sup>(1)</sup>. This is a positive variable, and can also be defined as the provision of technical and material assistance and emotional support to groups or persons, positively impacting receivers/users<sup>(2)</sup>.

Social support can carry many connotations, namely: social network, including significant social contacts; people with whom intimate feelings can be confided, and human company. It has also been defined as the gathering of individuals or between individuals and groups, which improves their adaptive skills when faced with short-term challenges<sup>(3)</sup>, conflicts and deprivation, an essential element in cases of illness<sup>(4)</sup>.

Social support is considered a protection factor and its process involves interaction among social structure, social relationships and personal characteristics, in addition to being consistently correlated with higher levels of well-being<sup>(5)</sup>. There are natural social support networks, such as family, friends and acquaintances, coworkers, neighbors, and religious peers<sup>(6)</sup>.

Therefore, social support is a term that refers to the existence or availability of individuals who can be trusted or counted on in times of need; people who provide others with love and a sense of personal worth<sup>(7)</sup>. This support can be provided immediately, depending on the proximity of individuals; however, these types of networks depend on the quality of the previously established relationship among members of the network, and if this relationship is weak, so is the support provided.

Social support can also be provided in the form of well-defined and organized structures accessible to all individuals. Health institutions are an example of this, and through multidisciplinary teams, they provide support that represents a protection factor in negative events and situations that in terms of the stress, anguish and uncertainty that are an ongoing result of the illness, treatment and health care process<sup>(8)</sup>.

Social support impacts the care experience. It is an interactive process between professionals and patients, in which bonds of friendship are established and information, emotional, material and affective support provides solutions for everyday situations<sup>(9)</sup>.

In light of the above, the authors were interested in learning the level of social support perceived by users of outpatient services in General Hospital 450 of the Secretariat of Health in Durango. Thus, the aim of the study was to establish the level of social support provided by physicians, nurses, and social workers as perceived by outpatients. This research can help identify areas in need of improvement, determine more efficient resource allocation, and increase quality of care and, consequently, patient satisfaction.

## METHOD

This was a descriptive cross-sectional quantitative study, with a nonprobabilistic sample of 287 outpatients of General Hospital 450 of the Secretariat of Health of the State of Durango, Mexico. The Social Support Scale in Health (ESSS) was used. The object of the study was the perception of patients of the support provided by physicians, nurses and social workers, assessed in terms of four basic areas: answers to questions about health problems, the need to talk openly about a health problem, expressing feelings about health problems, and the availability of social support. The instrument contains 12 items (four for each health professional) and is answered on a 4-point Likert scale. Minimum and maximum scores for each professional and for the total scale are 0-12 and 0-36, respectively. The internal consistency of the instrument was 0.96. Data analysis was conducted on SPSS software, using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics.

First, the study was submitted to and approved by a research ethics committee. Then, the researchers visited the directors of the institution and obtained their permission to conduct the study, after which the data collection process began. The outpatients were invited to participate individually, after being informed about the general objective of the study and signing an informed consent form, all in accordance with the ethics criteria for health research.

Data were collected on weekday mornings and afternoons of January 2019. The present study is based on General Health Law, under the Regulation in Health Research Matters. It also abides by the Helsinki Declaration created by the World Medical Association; considering recommendations that guide biomedical research with human subjects.

## RESULTS

Of the total outpatient population (450), 287 participated in the study. Of the sample, 176 (61.3%) were women; 112 (39%) were married; 73 (25.4%) had a secondary education level, and 164 (57%) lived in the city. Of the total number of outpatient users, waiting time could be anywhere between 30 minutes and 3 hours, 223 (81.2%) had to wait up to 3 hours.

Table 1 - Sociodemographic data of health service users. Durango, Durango, Mexico, 2017

| Variable           |                      | n   | %    |
|--------------------|----------------------|-----|------|
| Gender             | Female               | 176 | 61.3 |
|                    | Male                 | 111 | 38.7 |
| Occupation         | Homemaker            | 93  | 32.4 |
|                    | Worker               | 166 | 57.8 |
|                    | Student              | 28  | 9.7  |
| Marital Status     | Single               | 69  | 24   |
|                    | Married              | 112 | 39   |
|                    | Widowed              | 38  | 13.2 |
|                    | Domestic partnership | 68  | 23.7 |
| Education Level    | None                 | 15  | 5.2  |
|                    | Primary              | 63  | 22   |
|                    | Secondary            | 73  | 25.4 |
|                    | Preparatory          | 64  | 22.3 |
|                    | Professional         | 72  | 25.1 |
| Place of Residence | Urban                | 164 | 57.1 |
|                    | Rural                | 123 | 42.8 |

In the present study, social support was divided into four dimensions, with the following total results: speaking openly about health problems ( $\bar{x} = 7.59$  SD  $\pm 2.46$ ), answering questions about health problems ( $\bar{x} = 7.71$  SD  $\pm 2.50$ ), expressing feelings in

front of professionals ( $\bar{x} = 7.56$  SD  $\pm 2.550$ ) and perceiving availability of support ( $\bar{x} = 7.60$  SD  $\pm 2.56$ ). In terms of the different professional categories, users perceived greater social support from the nursing staff ( $\bar{x} = 10.70$  SD  $\pm 2.56$ ) when compared to physicians ( $\bar{x} = 10.19$  SD  $\pm 3.50$ ) and social workers ( $\bar{x} = 9.58$  SD  $\pm 3.83$ ).

Specifically, the domain "answering questions about health problems" presented a significant difference between nursing and medical professionals (( $\bar{x} = 10.70$ ; ( $\bar{x} = 10.19$ ; SD  $p = .01$ ), nurses and social workers ( $\bar{x} = 10.70$ ;  $\bar{x} = 9.58$ ;  $p = .00$ ). Furthermore, the outpatients reported that nurses were more likely to answer their questions, as observed in Table 2.

Table 2 - Answering questions about health problems. Durango, Durango, Mexico, 2017

| Groups     |            | Means | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval |       |
|------------|------------|-------|------|-------------------------|-------|
|            |            |       |      | min                     | max   |
| Physicians | Nurses     | 10.70 | .010 | -.234                   | -.024 |
|            | S. Workers | 9.58  | .125 | -.018                   | .220  |
| Nurses     | Physicians | 10.19 | .010 | .024                    | .234  |
|            | S. Workers | 9.58  | .000 | .104                    | .355  |
| S. Workers | Physicians | 10.19 | .125 | -.220                   | .018  |
|            | Nurses     | 10.70 | .000 | -.355                   | -.104 |

Regarding the dimension "the need to speak openly about health problem", significant differences were observed between the nurses and physicians ( $X = 10.70$   $X = 10.19$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ); nurses and social workers ( $X = 10.70$ ;  $X = 9.58$ ;  $p = .00$ ), and physicians and social workers ( $X = 10.19$ ;  $X = 9.58$ ;  $p = .01$ ). According to outpatients, they were able to talk openly about their health problems with nurses, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 - Need to speak openly about health problems. Durango, Durango, Mexico, 2017

| Groups     |            | Difference between means | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval |       |
|------------|------------|--------------------------|------|-------------------------|-------|
|            |            |                          |      | min.                    | max.  |
| Physicians | Nurses     | 10.70                    | .003 | -.282                   | -.045 |
|            | S. Workers | 9.58                     | .012 | .027                    | .280  |
| Nurses     | Physicians | 10.19                    | .003 | .045                    | .282  |
|            | S. Workers | 9.58                     | .000 | .184                    | .451  |
| S. Workers | Physicians | 10.19                    | .012 | -.280                   | -.027 |
|            | Nurses     | 10.70                    | .000 | -.451                   | -.184 |

As illustrated in Table 4, regarding the dimension "expressing feelings", significant differences were observed between social workers and physicians ( $X=9.58$ ;  $X=10.19$ ;  $p= .01$ ); and nurses and social workers ( $X=10.70$ ;  $X= 9.58$ ;  $p= .00$ ). Again, users felt most comfortable expressing their feelings about their health issues with nurses.

Table 4 - Expressing feelings about health problems, Durango, Durango, Mexico, 2017

| Groups     |            | Difference of means | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval |       |
|------------|------------|---------------------|------|-------------------------|-------|
|            |            |                     |      | min                     | max   |
| Physicians | Nurses     | 10.70               | .035 | -.251                   | -.006 |
|            | S. Workers | 9.58                | .011 | .029                    | .292  |
| Nurses     | Physicians | 10.19               | .035 | .006                    | .251  |
|            | S. Workers | 9.58                | .000 | .165                    | .413  |
| S. Workers | Physicians | 10.19               | .011 | -.292                   | -.029 |
|            | Nurses     | 10.70               | .000 | -.413                   | -.165 |

Regarding total social support perceived by users, significant differences were observed between nurses and physicians ( $X=10.70$ ;  $X=10.19$ ;  $p= .01$ ); and social workers and nurses ( $X=9.58$ ;  $X=10.70$ ;  $p= .00$ ). The studied outpatients of the General Hospital believed that the nursing staff provided the greatest social support, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 - Total social support perceived by outpatients of General Hospital 450. Durango, Durango, Mexico, 2017

| Groups         |                | Difference between means | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval |       |
|----------------|----------------|--------------------------|------|-------------------------|-------|
|                |                |                          |      | min.                    | max.  |
| Physicians     | Nurses         | 10.70                    | .002 | -.878                   | -.153 |
|                | Social Workers | 9.58                     | .002 | .181                    | 1.038 |
| Nurses         | Physicians     | 10.19                    | .002 | .153                    | .878  |
|                | Social Workers | 9.58                     | .000 | .681                    | 1.570 |
| Social Workers | Physicians     | 10.19                    | .002 | -1.038                  | -.181 |
|                | Nurses         | 10.70                    | .000 | -1.570                  | -.681 |

## DISCUSSION

Social support fosters positive coping attitudes in individuals for handling health conditions. In general, the population of the present study perceived high levels of social support in their four dimensions: answers to questions about their issues, the need to

speak openly about these problems, expressing their feelings about health problems, and the availability of health support. It is important to consider that social support can help individuals adapt to their condition, resulting in positive coping mechanisms. Social support can directly impact health, and, therefore must be considered an essential and basic need for people's health and well-being<sup>(10)</sup>. It is important to highlight that, overall, nurses were perceived by the participants as providing the most social support.

Providing people with adequate information allows them to better cope with disease or stressful situations, thus generating coping strategies that allow them to adapt to a new or unknown event<sup>(4)</sup>. In the present study, nurses scored high in the dimension "answers questions about health problems", showing that they are considered the professional category that best provides support in everything relative to their disease, in contrast with physicians and social workers. Considering the contact that nurses have with users in this institution, they were able to create a high level of trust, thus making people feel comfortable in asking them questions about their health condition or treatment.

Adequate communication allows for high levels of user satisfaction. When health professionals are able to identify and understand the problems of users in different hospital services, together, they are able to create coping strategies to deal with the disease, and consequently, patients experience greater well-being in their health. In the present study, the dimensions "need to speak openly or express feeling" presented adequate scores, showing that participants felt they could talk and express their feelings with health professionals<sup>(11)</sup>. People who turn to health institutions create bonds with health professionals; however, the strongest bonds tend to be with the nursing staff, in whom patients trust enough to express feelings and emotions generated by stressful events.

Social support plays four roles. First, it plays an emotional role, providing individuals with a sense of worthiness, affection, trust and safety. Second, it provides a sense of value, in which individuals perceive they can count on someone and that they are being socially monitored. Next, it plays an informative role, as a source of counseling or cognitive guide, helping people to define and cope with problematic events through assessment. Finally, social support is instrumental, providing concrete and material help. Based on the above, the participants of the present study perceived good levels of social support, generating effective coping strategies, not only to handle disease, but also any occasional stressful event.

## CONCLUSION

The participants perceived that nurses provided them with the greatest social support in terms of being able to express their feelings. Similarly, nurses allow people to ask questions about their condition. In general, the participants perceived a good level of social support from the health team as a whole; however, nurses stood out as the professionals who most support patients under their care.

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