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Lifting the weight of chronic illness

WSU social work researcher uncovering ways to cope with long-term disease and end-of-life issues

Faith Pratt Hopp, Ph.D., M.S.W., assistant professor of social work in Wayne State University's School of Social Work, recognizes that advanced chronic diseases such as heart failure and diabetes have as many psychological implications as they do medical.

A metro Detroit native, Hopp became interested in end-of-life issues while working at a nursing home in high school. "I was really struck by the fact that a lot of people there seemed very unhappy," she said.

Her father, Henry Johnson Pratt, was a WSU political science professor who specialized in policy issues related to aging. They frequently discussed Hopp's experiences at home. "I was fully immersed in the everyday issues of people facing the end of their lives," Hopp said. "At home, I discussed these things with my father, who gave me insight into the policies that influenced what I was seeing. This early awareness helped shape my path as a researcher."

Hopp conducts qualitative and quantitative research to understand the experience of those with advanced chronic illness, as well as their caregivers, with the purpose of identifying coping strategies and developing interventions. Her most recent studies were funded by a \$100,000 grant from the John A. Hartford Geriatric Social Work Faculty Scholars Program. The research was done in the context of the social worker – a job she describes as an art. "The role of a social worker is more than helping people find ways to pay their medical bills – it's helping them access all the resources in their community, both tangible and intangible," she said.

One of Hopp's main areas of focus is heart failure. In a recent paper, Hopp conducted an

in-depth analysis of those living with heart failure. The results identified difficulties in navigating the health care system, life disruption, social isolation, uncertainty about prognosis and the symptoms of heart failure as some of the condition's most common stressors.

Focusing on the urban population, Hopp conducted a study with Robert Zalenski, M.D., the Brooks F. Bock Professor of Emergency Medicine in WSU's School of Medicine and director of palliative care at Sinai-Grace Hospital, which provided a deeper understanding of African-American elders with advanced heart failure. Living scared, trying to make sense of heart failure, resiliency, spirituality and self-care were prominent themes.

She also explored the experience of African-American daughters filling the role of primary caregivers for parents with heart failure. "The study found that social workers play a critical role in supporting and advocating for caregivers, helping them cope with stressors associated with advanced illness, connecting families with culturally acceptable services and facilitating communication with health care providers," Hopp said.

Hopp also has conducted studies on the merits of home care telehealth systems on improving mental health and lowering the use of inpatient and outpatient health care. One such study, funded by a Veterans Administration Health Services Research and Development grant, found that satisfaction with the equipment was high, and further studies are necessary to determine whether it's beneficial as an adjunct to traditional at-home care. "For some, it may provide a sense of control, that they are overseeing the maintenance of their condition," Hopp said.

Among her major discoveries, Hopp has learned that the first step of a social worker is getting people to understand that they have a condition. The next step is drawing upon resources in their patients' lives and social networks, community centers and programs to strengthen each patient's sense of support. In addition, fostering a patient's sense of independence has a positive effect on quality of life. On a policy level, the research underlines the need for an adequate health care safety net for people with chronic conditions regardless of their job status.

At the root of Hopp's findings is the need for social workers to execute psychosocial interventions. "The goal of my research is to draw attention to the invaluable work of social workers, while continuing to uncover ways to improve the assistance they provide those who are managing the most difficult of life circumstances," she said.



About Dr. Faith Pratt Hopp:

Dr. Hopp received a B.A. in psychology from Oberlin College, an M.A. in sociology with a specialization in health and aging, an M.S.W. with a specialization in policy, and a Ph.D. in social work

and sociology from the University of Michigan. She joined Wayne State University in 2006.

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