


SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF PATIENTS WITH PROLONGED ICU ADMISSION: CHALLENGES, NEEDS, AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze social support for families of patients in prolonged ICU hospitalization, identifying their challenges, needs, and intervention strategies. The methodology employed consists of a systematic literature review conducted across major academic databases, such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, and Google Scholar, using keywords related to the topic. Peer-reviewed articles published in the last 10 years, addressing social support in the ICU context, were included. After selecting the studies, a qualitative analysis was performed to identify the main emerging themes, such as social support strategies, emotional needs of families, challenges faced during prolonged hospitalization, and the psychological impacts of this experience. The quality assessment of the studies included an analysis of methodological robustness, clarity in sample definitions, and the depth of interventions. The key findings indicate that families of critically ill patients face high levels of stress, anxiety, and psychological suffering, necessitating adequate social support to mitigate these impacts. Strategies such as emotional support, clear communication, and interdisciplinary care were highlighted as effective. The review also revealed gaps in the literature, particularly regarding the long-term effectiveness of interventions and the impact of communication technologies. The final considerations emphasize the importance of humanized practices and the integrated role of the

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multiprofessional team in providing effective social support to families, as well as suggesting further research on innovative interventions and technologies in social support.

Keywords: Social Support. ICU Family Care. Family Caregiving. Intensive Care Unit. Family Mental Health.

INTRODUCTION

Prolonged hospitalization in Intensive Care Units (ICU) poses significant challenges not only to patients but also to their families, who often face high levels of stress, anxiety, and psychological distress. These family members live in a constant state of uncertainty and emotional overload, dealing with the complexity of clinical decisions, a lack of clear information about the patient's progress, and the physical and emotional strain associated with staying in the ICU environment. Therefore, a family member's experience in the ICU is an intense one that can deeply affect their mental and emotional health.

Although medical care is prioritized in ICUs, social support for families is often neglected, which contributes to the exacerbation of their suffering. When offered appropriately, social support can reduce stress and improve the emotional well-being of family members, being essential in helping them cope with the difficulties of prolonged hospitalization. However, significant gaps still exist in understanding which support strategies are most effective, particularly when considering the specific context of ICUs and the particular needs of families of patients in critical conditions.

The justification for this study is based on the need to deepen our understanding of how social support can positively impact the well-being of families of patients undergoing prolonged ICU stays. Analyzing social support strategies, the challenges faced by families, and existing interventions is essential to promoting a more humanized and effective approach. This study aims not only to understand the challenges and needs of families but also to suggest improvements in social support practices, aiming for a more integrated and collaborative approach.

The primary goal of this work is to analyze, through a literature review, how social support can influence the well-being of family members of patients undergoing prolonged ICU stays, highlighting the main challenges faced, the needs identified, and the proposed intervention strategies. The study will seek to identify the emotional, psychological, and social impacts that families face, explore their social support needs, review the most effective interventions for providing this support, and investigate the role of the multidisciplinary team in this process. Furthermore, it will examine how social support practices can be improved based on the evidence found, contributing to the improvement of care and family well-being practices.

Thus, this study aims to contribute to improving social support practices in ICUs, promoting a more holistic and integrated approach that recognizes and meets the needs of

families, as well as strengthening collaboration among health professionals involved in the care process.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this literature review will follow a systematic and critical approach, aiming to synthesize the evidence on social support for families of patients undergoing prolonged ICU stays, exploring their challenges, needs, and intervention strategies. Initially, a comprehensive search will be conducted in the main scientific databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, and Google Scholar, using carefully selected keywords such as "social support ICU family," "family-centered care in ICU," "psychological impact ICU family," and "emotional support ICU relatives." The research will focus on articles published in the last 10 years, excluding studies not peer-reviewed or that do not directly address social support in the ICU context.

After the search, the selection of articles will be carried out through a rigorous screening process, based on the previously defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Titles and abstracts of the studies will be analyzed, followed by a full reading of the articles that meet the established criteria, for a more in-depth evaluation of their relevance and methodological rigor.

The data analysis will be qualitative, aiming to identify emerging themes and patterns in the selected articles. The main focuses of the analysis will include the social support strategies adopted in ICUs, the emotional and psychological needs of family members, the challenges they face during prolonged hospitalization, and the psychological impacts resulting from this experience.

Furthermore, the evaluation of study quality will be conducted considering aspects such as the clarity in defining samples, the depth of analysis of social support interventions, the validity of the methodologies employed, and the robustness of the conclusions. From this analysis, it will be possible to identify gaps in the literature, inconsistencies between findings, and opportunities for the development of new practices and approaches to support family members.

Finally, the synthesis of results will be presented in a critical analysis, highlighting practical implications for ICU management and suggesting directions for future research, based on the gaps identified and the needs for improvement in the field of social support for families of critically ill patients.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF PROLONGED ICU STAYS

Prolonged stays in Intensive Care Units (ICUs) have profound impacts on the families of patients, influencing their psychological and social spheres. The ICU environment, characterized by advanced technological equipment, strict access rules, and high emotional load, can generate significant stress and a sense of helplessness among family members. This experience is intensified by the unpredictability of the patient's clinical condition and the possibility of unfavorable outcomes (Davidson et al., 2017).

Family members of patients hospitalized for prolonged periods often exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression, and acute stress. According to Pereira et al. (2020), these symptoms can be attributed to the emotional pressure caused by the need for quick decision-making and constant exposure to the uncertainty of the prognosis. Moreover, the emotional bond with the patient intensifies the sense of suffering, especially when the patient's clinical condition is critical.

Another relevant aspect is the emergence of caregiver syndrome, where family members, often the primary emotional and logistical managers of patient care, develop physical and psychological exhaustion due to the overload. Studies show that family members of ICU patients are at higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), even after the patient is discharged or passes away (Schmidt et al., 2021).

On the social level, family members face challenges related to isolation and disruption of routine. Often, the dedication to accompanying the patient leads to withdrawal from work, financial limitations, and distancing from family and social interactions (Curtis et al., 2016). This isolation not only increases the sense of being alone but also may compromise the family member's support network, worsening emotional suffering.

Furthermore, prolonged ICU stays often impose a financial burden on families, especially in healthcare systems where medical and hospital costs are high. According to Mendonça et al. (2019), the economic impact may include expenses with transportation, food, and, in some cases, lodging near the hospital, further exacerbating stress and anxiety.

The absence of effective communication between the healthcare team and the family members is a factor that worsens the psychological and social impacts. Insufficient or confusing information about the patient's condition can create insecurity and increase stress levels (Oliveira et al., 2020). Additionally, the lack of emotional support and the perception

of impersonal care from healthcare professionals contribute to dissatisfaction and worsen the family member's experience in the hospital environment (Silva et al., 2018).

To mitigate these impacts, literature highlights the importance of social support and humanized interventions. Davidson et al. (2017) point out that implementing practices such as structured family meetings, psychological care, and the provision of clear and objective information can significantly reduce emotional suffering. Furthermore, the support provided by multidisciplinary teams, including psychologists, social workers, and nurses, plays a crucial role in promoting the well-being of family members (Duarte & Furtado, 2021).

In summary, the psychological and social impacts of prolonged ICU stays are complex and multifactorial, requiring special attention from both healthcare professionals and hospital institutions. The adoption of integrated and humanized strategies is essential to improve the family members' experience and reduce the emotional and social damage associated with this context.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE ICU CONTEXT

The Intensive Care Unit (ICU) is an environment characterized by high complexity, where patients face critical health situations, and families experience periods of intense emotional stress. In this scenario, social support emerges as a central element to minimize the psychological and social impacts resulting from prolonged hospitalization.

Social support can be defined as the emotional, informational, and instrumental resources provided by individuals or groups in times of need. According to House et al. (1988), social support is essential for promoting emotional well-being and the ability to cope with adverse situations. In the ICU context, it plays a crucial role in mitigating feelings of isolation and helplessness experienced by the patients' families.

Moreover, the presence of an effective support network has been associated with better psychological outcomes, such as reduced anxiety and depression levels. As highlighted by Schmidt et al. (2021), family members who receive adequate emotional and instrumental support show greater resilience and capacity to cope with the challenges imposed by ICU hospitalization.

Social support can be divided into three main dimensions: emotional, instrumental, and informational.

- **Emotional Support:** Emotional support involves empathy, care, and concern, being fundamental to reduce the psychological suffering of family members.

Davidson et al. (2017) point out that active listening by the healthcare team, combined with genuine concern, strengthens the bond between families and professionals, providing emotional security.

- **Instrumental Support:** Instrumental support refers to the provision of practical resources, such as guidance on administrative or financial matters related to the patient's hospitalization. According to Duarte and Furtado (2021), the availability of social services in the hospital setting is crucial to help families cope with the logistical and financial demands of hospitalization.
- **Informational Support:** Informational support involves the transmission of clear and objective information about the patient's clinical condition and the care plan. Studies show that effective communication between the healthcare team and families significantly reduces uncertainty and anxiety levels (Oliveira et al., 2020).

Despite its importance, the provision of social support in the ICU context faces several challenges. The high workload of healthcare professionals and the lack of specific training in communication and support practices can compromise the quality of the support offered (Silva et al., 2018). Furthermore, the perception that the ICU environment is excessively technical and impersonal hinders the establishment of humanized relationships between the team and the families (Curtis et al., 2016).

The literature highlights various strategies that can be implemented to strengthen social support for families in the ICU. These include:

- **Structured Family Meetings:** These are opportunities for families to receive detailed information and clarify doubts with the healthcare team (Davidson et al., 2017).
- **Psychological Support:** Including psychologists in the multidisciplinary team contributes to emotional support and the development of coping strategies (Mendonça et al., 2019).
- **Training for Healthcare Teams:** Training focused on humanized communication can improve interactions between professionals and families, promoting patient- and family-centered care (Duarte & Furtado, 2021).

Social support plays a central role in helping families face the adversities experienced by ICU patients, providing emotional, instrumental, and informational resources that enhance their mental health and resilience. However, the implementation of

effective support practices requires a collective effort from healthcare teams and hospital institutions, as well as the development of policies that prioritize humanized care.

SOCIAL SUPPORT NEEDS OF FAMILIES IN THE ICU

The ICU environment is highly challenging not only for patients but also for their families, who often face significant emotional, social, and psychological impacts. The presence of a loved one in critical condition intensifies feelings of vulnerability, anxiety, and distress, requiring appropriate social support to cope with these situations.

Social support is essential to help families face the pressures associated with ICU hospitalization. This support can be divided into dimensions such as emotional, instrumental, informational, and evaluative support. According to House (1981), emotional support is key to reducing stress and promoting well-being, while informational support helps the family understand the patient's clinical condition, facilitating informed decision-making.

Family members often experience high levels of emotional stress during the patient's hospitalization. Studies suggest that support programs promoting emotional support, such as active listening sessions and spaces for interaction with trained professionals, can mitigate symptoms of anxiety and depression (Cousin & Crane, 2018). In this sense, emotional support should be offered continuously and personalized.

Another critical aspect is informational support. According to Schaffer et al. (2020), clear and objective communication between the healthcare team and families is crucial to reducing uncertainty and increasing confidence in the treatment provided. Detailed information about the patient's health status and treatment plans helps minimize feelings of helplessness and insecurity.

In addition to emotional and informational support, instrumental support is equally important. Often, families need practical assistance, such as transportation, accommodations near the ICU, and financial support to manage the indirect costs of hospitalization (Burch & Smith, 2019). These interventions are essential to alleviate the practical and logistical impact of prolonged hospitalization.

The absence of adequate social support can exacerbate the psychological suffering of families, leading to conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. According to Lam et al. (2021), strengthening social support can act as a protective factor, promoting resilience and helping families cope better with the critical situation.

Humanized practices, which include psychological support, spiritual care, and attention to the specific needs of each family, are crucial for improving the experience of family members during hospitalization (Rogers et al., 2020). Such interventions not only strengthen the bonds between healthcare professionals and families but also contribute to a more collaborative and empathetic environment.

Social support is a central element in mitigating the challenges faced by families of patients hospitalized in the ICU. Well-planned interventions, which include emotional, informational, and instrumental support, are essential to promote the psychological and social well-being of these individuals. Thus, it is imperative for healthcare teams to develop effective strategies to meet the complex needs of families in critical care settings.

HUMANIZED STRATEGIES FOR FAMILY SUPPORT

The ICU environment is often perceived as cold and challenging by the families of hospitalized patients. In light of this, the implementation of humanized strategies to support these families is essential to reduce the emotional and psychological impact caused by the hospital setting, promoting well-being and resilience.

Humanization of care in ICUs involves recognizing the emotional, social, and spiritual needs of the patients' families, valuing their active participation in the care process (Pedersen et al., 2018). According to Brazil (2010), the National Humanization Policy (PNH) highlights the importance of practices that welcome families as integral parts of care, promoting effective communication and empathy from the healthcare team.

Communication is one of the pillars of humanized strategies. Informing families clearly, empathetically, and consistently reduces anxiety and strengthens trust between healthcare professionals and families (Olsen & Harder, 2021). Additionally, regular meetings between doctors and families help clarify doubts and align expectations regarding the patient's treatment, promoting transparency in the decision-making process (Turner et al., 2019).

Another essential humanized strategy is the creation of physical and psychological spaces for welcoming. Comfortable waiting rooms, rest areas, and the presence of trained professionals to provide emotional support are measures that can reduce family stress (Fernandez et al., 2020). Moreover, support groups for families have proven effective in promoting the sharing of experiences and reducing social isolation.

Support for the spiritual and cultural needs of families also plays an important role in humanized care. The presence of religious leaders or hospital chaplains can offer comfort and hope, while respecting cultural beliefs strengthens the bond between families and the healthcare team (White et al., 2021).

Educating families about the patient's clinical condition and the ICU's functioning is a practice that contributes to empowerment and reduces feelings of helplessness. Educational programs, such as workshops and informational materials, have been shown to improve understanding and the coping capacity of families (Sundararajan et al., 2019).

Humanized strategies have a positive impact not only on the well-being of families but also on the clinical progression of patients. Adequate emotional support contributes to a more collaborative environment, reducing conflicts and increasing family satisfaction with the care provided (Brown et al., 2020).

Humanized strategies for supporting families in the ICU are essential for promoting comprehensive and empathetic care. Clear communication, welcoming spaces, spiritual and cultural practices, and educational programs are tools that strengthen the relationship between healthcare teams and families, reducing the negative impacts of prolonged hospitalization and promoting a more humanized and respectful experience.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM IN FAMILY SUPPORT

Family support in the context of an ICU is a crucial element for the emotional and psychological well-being of the family members of hospitalized patients (Curtis et al., 2016; Davidson et al., 2017). The multidisciplinary team, composed of professionals from different healthcare fields, plays a key role in this process by offering care that goes beyond direct patient assistance (Schmidt et al., 2021). The joint work of these professionals contributes to a more holistic and effective approach to supporting families, reducing emotional impact and fostering a more welcoming and humanized environment (Silva et al., 2018).

The multidisciplinary team includes doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, psychologists, social workers, nutritionists, among other professionals, each with their own expertise, but with a common goal: promoting the health and well-being of the patient and their family (Figueiredo et al., 2020).

This integrated approach ensures that all the needs of the patient and their family are met comprehensively, considering not only medical aspects but also emotional, social, and spiritual issues (Curtis et al., 2016; Davidson et al., 2017). The involvement of the

multidisciplinary team allows these diverse needs to be addressed collaboratively, offering more comprehensive and humanized care (Schmidt et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2018).

Communication between the members of the multidisciplinary team is essential to ensure that the support provided to families is effective and appropriate. Studies indicate that clear and constant communication between healthcare professionals and families reduces uncertainty and stress, as well as increases satisfaction with the care provided (Bragadottir et al., 2019).

The presence of psychologists and social workers, for example, in team meetings can help clarify emotional questions from family members and promote a more humanized and sensitive approach to their needs (Davidson et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2021). The role of these professionals is essential to ensure that families receive the psychological support needed during the hospitalization process, helping to reduce suffering and anxiety (Curtis et al., 2016; Silva et al., 2018).

The role of psychologists in the ICU has been highlighted as one of the pillars of family support. According to Santos et al. (2019), psychologists are crucial in helping family members deal with stress, anxiety, and grief, in addition to acting as mediators in situations of conflict between the family and the medical team. Their presence allows family members to express their emotions and receive support to face the adversities of the hospitalization process. Social workers play an important role in providing practical support to families, such as guidance on rights and social benefits, as well as offering emotional and psychological support. They are essential in accompanying families during hospitalization and planning post-discharge support, contributing to the adaptation to home life and minimizing the social impact of illness (Diniz et al., 2018).

Although physiotherapy is traditionally focused on the physical treatment of the patient, physiotherapists also play an important role in supporting families, especially those of patients with mechanical ventilation or limited mobility. Guidance on daily patient care and education on recovery processes are essential to ensure continuity of treatment and improve family well-being (Andrade et al., 2021).

The integration of various professionals in the family support process brings several benefits. According to Lima et al. (2020), a well-coordinated team can provide more effective support, resulting in a more positive experience for both patients and their families. The collaborative work between doctors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers

promotes more complete and humane care, assisting in coping with stress and reducing the sense of helplessness of family members.

The involvement of the multidisciplinary team in supporting the families of ICU patients is essential for a comprehensive and humanized approach. The collaboration between different healthcare fields provides not only technical care but also emotional and social care, which improves the quality of care and contributes to the well-being of families. Therefore, investing in the training and strengthening of the multidisciplinary team is essential to ensure that family support is effective, understanding, and welcoming.

CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE ICU

Social support in the ICU (Intensive Care Unit) is a crucial aspect of the comprehensive care of patients and their families, aiming not only at medical treatment but also emotional and psychological assistance. However, providing this support faces a series of challenges, from the lack of resources to communication barriers between healthcare professionals and families. Understanding these challenges and the possible perspectives to overcome them is essential for improving the quality of social support offered in ICU settings (Smith & Johnson, 2021).

Social support in the ICU can be limited by a variety of structural, organizational, and individual factors. One of the main challenges is related to the healthcare professionals' workload, as they often cannot dedicate sufficient time to provide adequate emotional support to the families of patients. According to Silva et al. (2020), the fast-paced environment of ICU units and the high emotional load can hinder the implementation of social support strategies, making it difficult for professionals to fully meet the emotional needs of families.

Additionally, communication between the healthcare team and the family is often a critical point. The lack of clarity in medical information or the absence of effective communication can increase the anxiety and uncertainty of family members, negatively impacting their emotional health and coping process (Hickson et al., 2020). This lack of communication can result in feelings of isolation, frustration, and helplessness, undermining the social support that could be provided.

Another relevant challenge is the resistance of some professionals to integrate social support as an essential part of treatment. Although emotional support is recognized as important, many professionals still see technical care as the primary priority in ICUs,

relegating social support to a secondary position (Carvalho et al., 2019). This can be exacerbated by a lack of specific training to address the emotional and psychological demands of families in critical situations.

Despite these challenges, there are several promising perspectives for improving social support in the ICU. One of them is the formation of multidisciplinary teams that include psychologists, social workers, and other mental health specialists, working in collaboration with doctors and nurses. According to Lima et al. (2021), the integration of professionals from different healthcare fields can provide more comprehensive care that focuses on both the patient's and the family's needs.

The implementation of structured communication and emotional support programs is also a strategy that can improve social support in ICUs. A study by Andrade et al. (2020) proposed creating communication protocols with families, including regular updates on the patient's status and the implementation of spaces dedicated to welcoming and listening to families. These practices help reduce anxiety and improve the relationship between the family and healthcare professionals.

Furthermore, promoting a more humanized environment in ICUs has gained momentum as a strategy to improve social support. This involves creating spaces that offer comfort to families, encouraging visitation, and ensuring the constant presence of trained professionals who can listen and provide emotional support to family members. This approach has been associated with greater family satisfaction and better emotional coping (Schmidt et al., 2021).

Technology can also play an important role in social support in the ICU, especially in the context of restricted visits, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual communication platforms, such as video calls, allow families to connect with their loved ones and the healthcare team, reducing isolation and improving emotional support. Studies like Oliveira et al. (2021) show that the use of these technologies helps reduce emotional stress and facilitates the adaptation process of families in high-complexity situations.

Although social support in the ICU faces several challenges, the perspectives for improving this support are diverse and promising. The combination of communication strategies, the formation of multidisciplinary teams, and the use of new technologies are key elements for providing more humanized and effective care. Additionally, healthcare institutions must recognize the importance of social support as an integral part of intensive

care, investing in training and resources that allow professionals to meet the emotional and psychological needs of family members appropriately.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Social support for the families of patients in long-term ICU stays is a fundamental aspect in promoting the emotional and psychological well-being of those involved, as well as contributing to improved communication between the healthcare team and the families. Throughout this study, it was possible to identify that the main challenges faced by these families include emotional stress, social isolation, anxiety about the patient's health status, lack of effective communication with healthcare professionals, and the overload generated by the constant uncertainty.

Additionally, the needs for social support primarily include offering clear and accessible information, continuous emotional support, active listening, and creating welcoming spaces for families. These needs are often neglected or underestimated, which can negatively impact the mental health of family members and, consequently, their ability to cope with the situation in a healthy manner. The studies analyzed suggest that structured interventions, such as the implementation of communication protocols, the creation of humanized environments, and the formation of multidisciplinary teams for psychosocial support, have proven to be effective strategies for mitigating the negative impacts of long-term ICU stays and providing the necessary support to families.

The review of social support practices in the ICU revealed that, although some promising initiatives exist, there are still significant gaps in the implementation of systematic and integrated strategies that effectively address the emotional and social demands of families. The integration of technologies, such as virtual communication platforms, also emerged as a potential solution to overcome the physical barriers imposed by hospitalization, especially during periods of restrictions, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is suggested that studies be conducted on the effectiveness of social support interventions over time, the use of virtual communication technologies, the integration of multidisciplinary teams, the implementation of structured communication protocols, the psychosocial impacts of long-term ICU stays, and the evaluation of humanized practices in supporting the families of ICU patients.

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