

Medical social workers' role in alcohol and drug abuse control in Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examined the role of medical social workers in curtailing alcohol and drug consumption in Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State. It employed a qualitative research design, adopting the Key Informant Interview (KII) strategy. Five (5) participants were randomly selected for the interview among community leaders, medical social workers, NDLEA officials and top civil servants working in the Primary Health Centers (PHCs) in the Local Government Area. The justification for limiting the number to only five (5) was that they were key informants who could provide credible information on the topic under investigation. Even though medical social workers performed credibly well in the course of performing their legitimate duty, the article highlights the significant challenges faced by medical social workers, including inadequate recognition, poor remuneration, and a lack of support from other professionals to complement their efforts in curtailing alcohol and drug abuse in Nigeria. The study recommends better integration of social work into healthcare systems, along with adequate welfare packages for workers, to motivate them to be more proactive in the performance of their statutory functions in Nigeria.

Keywords: Medical Social Workers, Alcohol Control, Drug Control, Olorunda LGA, Osun State

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Scholars have regarded the issue of alcohol and drug abuse as an act of consumption of drugs or alcohol against their original purpose. As revealed by the World Health Organization (WHO) in its 2019 report, alcohol and drug abuse refers to the act of making use of psychoactive substances such as alcohol and drugs against the prescription recommended by medical health officials. As affirmed by WHO (2019), the increase in the prevalence of psychoactive drug substances has been observed globally, where 0.9% of the world's population has been engaged in alcohol and drug abuse, which has accounted for over 3 million deaths annually. In Nigeria, the National Drugs Law and Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) 2024 report revealed that the country faces difficulty in curtailing illegal drug and substance taking among citizens, with over 2.6 million people within the age bracket of 10 to 24 years addicted to the consumption of psychoactive substances. This has resulted in long-term damage to their brain and liver, and makes other organs of the body malfunction. As noted by Abdulrazaq (2025), drug abuse in Nigeria has become a national emergency, threatening both public health and national security. The rapid rise in substance abuse, especially among young people, has fueled violent crimes, insurgency, and economic instability. This is evident from cannabis and codeine to tramadol and methamphetamine; the use of illicit substances has been wreaking havoc on individuals, families, and communities. Abdulrazaq (2025) observes that it is alarming when criminal organizations, including insurgent groups like Boko Haram and armed bandits, have exploited drug trafficking to fund their operations, making the fight against drugs a crucial battle for Nigeria's future. More worrisome is that the health consequences of drug addiction are equally devastating. Despite the 1990 National Drug Policy adopted to prevent the illegal use of drugs, the NDLEA (2024) acknowledged that the country is still facing the risk of psychosis and schizophrenia due to alcohol and drug abuse by Nigerians within the range of 14-60, despite the presence of NDLEA in all of the 774 local government areas in Nigeria. The abuse of opioids and synthetic drugs has led to a surge in mental health disorders, psychiatric admissions, and cases of sudden deaths due to overdoses. Substance dependence has crippled productivity, with many youths, who should be contributing to national development instead, wasting away due to addiction (Abdulrazaq, 2025).

As affirmed by Endurance, Grace and Mezewo (2024), the role of medical social workers in educating Nigerians on alcohol and drug abuse cannot be overstated. As professionally trained, the workers have been visible in providing professional counselling and emotional support to people addicted to illicit drugs in Nigeria. They advocate for the rights of individuals addicted to illegal drugs to have access to healthcare services by conducting home visits and assessing patients' living conditions for appropriate interventions. A medical social worker usually engages in research and policy development to improve patients' healthcare outcomes and also provides crisis intervention services. The workers also assist with issues related to case management, supportive therapy, and psycho-social assessment of the drugs addicted person (Endurance, et al. 2023). The profession parades dedicated personnel who are professionally trained to assist medical personnel, outpatient clinics, and community health agencies by providing long-term care facilities for patients who need psychosocial support. Medical social workers also collaborate with other healthcare professionals to develop a comprehensive treatment plan for those who have been affected by the illicit drug. In collaboration with NDLEA, Abdulrazaq (2025) affirms that the War Against Drug Abuse (WADA) initiative was launched in 2021 under former President Muhammadu Buhari's administration. WADA is a holistic and aggressive campaign designed to cut off the supply and demand for illicit drugs.

While the crackdown on drug dealers and traffickers remains a key component, the initiative also focuses on preventing drug abuse through sensitization, rehabilitation, and community engagement. In Osun State, Olujobi (2024) avers that medical social workers have been credited for contributing positively to alcohol and drug abuse enlightenment programs at the grassroots level. Evidence shows that medical social workers help reduce healthcare costs by preventing unnecessary hospitalizations. Their involvement in chronic disease management programs has been acknowledged to promote a healthy environment in the state. With their intervention, medical social workers also engage in counselling services and contribute to the recovery of individuals with substance use disorders. The services of medical social workers in providing non-medical support to people were also noticeable, and they are proactive in educating people on preventive measures against illicit drug use.

However, despite the foregoing laudable achievement, Olujobi (2024) affirms that substance abuse rates at the grassroots level are so alarming. In Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State, the empirical studies revealed that 12.3% of residents usually engaged in substance abuse, with 29.8% having consumed alcohol, Shisha and tramadol. This has resulted in associated health issues among addicted persons within the locality despite a series of sensitization campaigns targeting schools, religious institutions, markets, and workplaces about the adverse effects of alcohol and drug abuse by the medical social workers in Osun State. It is in the light of the above situation that this research work investigated the impact of medical social workers on alcohol and drug abuse in the Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Local Government

Local government is a term scholars use to describe the lowest tier of administration in a state. It is a form of government that is geographically localized, with limited power and responsibility assigned to it in the constitution. Claassen and Magalhães (2022) note that local government is the system of governance that operates at the local level, typically within a specific geographic area such as a city, town, or district; it is a form of public administration closest to the people, and is responsible for providing basic services at the community level. According to Mangan (2024), local governments play a vital role in promoting grassroots development in the state. They exist to improve service delivery to people at the grassroots level and are also designed for economic growth, engaging with citizens to understand their needs within the locality. As noted by Adeyeye (2016), local government is always used to differentiate grassroots government from other tiers of government; it is a sub-unit of governance constituted by law with substantial control over local activities. It is a prescribed means of governance that manages public affairs at the local level of administration. Local government is a political subdivision of a country, constituted by law, with substantial control over local activities and constitutional power to impose taxes and exact labour for the prescribed purpose of promoting good governance at the grassroots level. This actually describes the local council as a constituted sub-government and political administration for the rural dwellers.

As a tier of government, George (2025) believes that local government makes decisions that affect the daily lives of citizens, typically led by elected representatives with a degree of autonomy to make decisions tailored to the needs of the local community. Local government, as the third tier of government, is the system of government at the grassroots level responsible for

providing a range of services, including infrastructure maintenance, public transportation, waste management, law enforcement, public safety, education, healthcare, and social services. It is often more responsive to citizens' needs and concerns. Augustine (2009) sees local government as a system of governance that trails towards the grassroots administration. Its composition comprises a body of elected and appointed representatives with a constitutional mandate of administering the community on behalf of the people. Therefore, local government is a tier of government through which popular participation of the people is constitutionally required, both in the choice of decision-makers and in the decision-making process.

Medical Social Workers

Medical social workers are professionals; they typically work in community health agencies to guide patients and their families who need psychosocial support. According to Dhooper (2020), medical social workers assess the psychosocial functioning of patients and their families regarding any medical issues. Medical social workers, as part of multidisciplinary teams, are well equipped to address the multidimensional issues related to public safety in restoring better, healthier living conditions for people. It assists in providing preventive care to the patient through psychotherapy and supportive counselling, and in strengthening their network of social supports. They provide services across three domains: intake and psychosocial assessment, case management and supportive therapy, and discharge planning and care that extends beyond hospitalization. They are also involved in patient and staff education, as well as policy research for health programs. Cabot (2022) avers that medical social workers typically work with other disciplines such as medicine, nursing, physical, occupational, speech, and recreational therapy. They help patients understand their illness or condition and provide information about resources available to help them cope with the emotional, financial, and social needs that arise with a diagnosis. Medical social workers provide a safe, judgment-free, culturally sensitive, and collaborative environment in which they can work with patients to address their needs or concerns. In addition to supporting individuals, medical social workers advocate and develop plans to meet community needs. Veta (2022) notes that investing in social services and professional health institutions can reduce healthcare spending. This also attests to the fact that many industrialized nations spend less on medical services due to their adequate funding of medical social workers' activities; therefore, government at all levels in Nigeria also needs to adequately fund the medical social workers' engagement because it assists in improving the health and quality of life for patients under their care. This will complement their efforts to be more committed to their core mandate: intake and psychosocial assessment, case management, and supportive therapy for their patients. Osayande (2024) argues that illicit drug consumption has resulted in mental health issues in Nigeria. However, little professional support from social workers has been able to reduce substance abuse in Nigeria. With millions of Nigerians affected by mental health conditions and an alarming rise in drug abuse, particularly among youth, the nation faces a quiet crisis that demands bold, evidence-based intervention. Despite policy frameworks, funding allocations, and global declarations, many communities remain untouched by mental health services. At the same time, stigma, infrastructure deficits, and human resource gaps continue to widen the treatment gap in Nigeria.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

On a general note, drug abuse is a concept that denotes an action where an individual makes use of a drug for a purpose other than intended, or in excessive amounts. Drug abuse involves illegal

drugs, as well as the consumption without a prescription by medical officials. As affirmed by Kaufman (2024), it is a form of substance use disorder. It is a serious public health concern that can result in devastating effects on individuals, families, and communities. Alcohol and drug abuse is a soft landing for physical and mental health problems, such as liver disease, heart disease, increased risk of infections, depression, anxiety, and psychosis. On the social relationship problems, alcohol and drug abuse can lead to family conflicts, job loss, and social isolation with impaired judgment and coordination, which can lead to an increased risk of accidents and injuries. Kaufman (2024) avers that illicit drug and alcohol users can also experience trauma, such as physical or emotional abuse, which may cause adverse effects on their body systems. It can also damage their brain, heart, and liver; their ability to learn and remember information; and cause psychological problems. Substance abuse contributes negatively to students' academic performance and emotional well-being in school. It is a progressive disorder that impairs brain function, coordination, and reflexes in school. This is also affirmed in the 2024 report of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), where alcohol and drug abuse by children has become a common challenge facing teens recently. It increases the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviours, particularly among youths with pre-existing mental health conditions. Illicit drugs and alcohol can also result in early dementia, sexual impotence, cirrhosis of the liver, and heart disease. The sudden withdrawal from the act can produce severe anxiety, tremors, hallucinations, and life-threatening convulsions in those who form the habit of using it without a prescription. AACAP (2024) posits that Alcohol use can result in short-term and long-term problems for those who choose to consume it, and its sedative effects depend on the level of consumption. Its impact on the body system may result in acute alcohol poisoning with loss of consciousness and difficulty in breathing, accompanied by red eyes, a persistent cough, and changes in eating and sleeping habits.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Methods and Materials

This study was conducted in some selected communities within the Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State. It employed a qualitative research design with content analysis and Key Informant Interviews (KII). Participants were randomly chosen from community leaders, medical social workers, the NDLEA, and top civil servants in Primary Health Centers (PHCs). The justification for limiting the number to two (2) medical social workers and one (1) top civil servant was that the local government has three (3) medical social workers as permanent staff, but the two (2) most senior among them were selected to participate in the KII session. The one (1) community leader from affected communities and the NDLEA official were also chosen as key informants who could provide credible information on the topic under investigation. Olorunda Local Government was selected for the research work because of the high prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse in the area.

The effects of medical social workers' intervention on alcohol and drug abuse among patients in the Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State

This discussion is on research question one (1) that investigates the effects of medical social workers' intervention on alcohol and drug abuse among patients in the Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State. The response to this research question came from the KII conducted, where one of the respondents asserted that:

Medical social workers have contributed significantly to controlling alcohol and drug abuse in the Olorunda Local Government because their intervention has reduced to the barest minimum the rate of substance abuse in our area of jurisdiction. The workers have been able to provide different forms of counselling therapy to those we apprehended, and this, to some extent, has addressed the underlying mental issues, such as depression and mental illness in the local government area **(KII/NDA, 2025)**.

One of the respondents also averred that:

Medical social workers in Olorunda Local Government need to be commended for the positive outcome of their intervention in curtailing substance abuse in our local government. The medical social workers, in the course of their engagement, orient residents on different coping mechanisms against illicit drug consumption. They promote stronger family relationships by facilitating family therapy sessions to improve the public health communication strategy in our community **(KII/MHO, 2025)**.

It was also reported by another respondent among medical social workers that:

We based our activities on alcohol and drug abuse in line with the policy consideration of the state government to eradicate illicit drug consumption in the state. With the support of NDLEA, our intervention to rehabilitate those addicted to drug abuse has made it possible for us to conduct motivational interaction techniques to rehabilitate the illicit drug users in the council area **(KII/MSW I, 2025)**.

Another respondent also noted that:

Medical social workers' community-based initiative has assisted in drug abuse control in our area. With the initiative, medical social workers connected our members who were addicted to substance consumption and provided them with specialized treatment services. Rehabilitation centers were established, and motivational interviewing techniques were also implemented to help individuals recover more quickly after treatment **(KII/CL, 2025)**.

Sequel to the responses from respondents' interview conducted through KII on research question one that investigates the extent to which medical social workers' intervention in alcohol and drug abuse among patients in Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State contributed positively to the recovery of individuals with substance use disorders. All respondents affirmed that the intervention initiatives of medical social workers validated the research question. Those responses are also in line with Galvani's (2015) argument that medical social workers' intervention initiatives always reflect the government's policy initiative to create individualized

treatment plans to eliminate alcohol and drug abuse in society. With the initiatives, medical social workers in Olorunda Local Government have been able to understand the unique dynamics of the disorder system and how it affects their clients' rehabilitation. It has also made it easy for them to navigate and evaluate various rehabilitation options available to control drug abuse in society. Therefore, medical social workers' efforts to prevent drug abuse in the Olorunda Local Government through intervention initiatives of the government proved positive and have become the best strategy to pave the way for significant control of alcohol and drug abuse in Osun State.

Medical social workers' counselling services' contribution to the recovery of individuals with substance use disorders in the Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State

This discussion is on research question two, and it dwells on the extent to which medical social workers' counselling services contribute to the recovery of individuals with substance use disorders in Olorunda Local Government. The response to this research question came from the KII conducted.

A respondent asserted that:

Medical social workers have been providing counselling services through a public awareness programme. Our community members have been counselled on the effects of drug abuse and alcohol consumption. We were told that drug abuse can result in chronic disease and heart disease, which can translate to certain types of cancer in the body. If not for the counselling strategy adopted by medical social workers, some members of our community would have contracted some preventable diseases through illicit drug consumption (KII/CL, 2025).

Also, another respondent corroborated that:

As medical social workers, we are doing our best to provide counselling services to the people. As part of our orientation, we let the communities in our local government realize that alcohol and drug abuse can lead to family conflicts, domestic violence, and child neglect, which can contribute to increased crime rates in society. With our intervention, we were able to make the members of the community aware of the socio-economic implications of alcohol and drug abuse in our area (KII/MSW II, 2025).

In another view, it was also reported that:

As one of the top civil servants in one of the PHCs in the local government, I have been witnessing different cases of mental health disorders and depression in our facilities. This decreased productivity, resulting in significant economic costs. But recently, there has been a substantial reduction in cases across all our facilities, achieved through

counselling services for youths to reduce illicit drug consumption (KII/MHO, 2025).

Also, it was noted by another KII respondent that:

The counselling services of medical social workers contribute successfully to the recovery of substance use disorders in Olorunda Local Government. Counselling services have increased individuals' motivation to seek recovery and maintain sobriety in society. Counselling services have assisted individuals with substance use disorders in understanding the underlying causes of drug abuse. However, the programme has made them develop a self-awareness process to recognize some healthy coping mechanisms to manage stress, anxiety, and other emotions that may trigger their substance use (KII/NDA, 2025).

Based on the respondents' comments from the KII session, the above analysis supported research question two: medical social workers' counselling services significantly contributed to the recovery of individuals with substance use disorders in the Olorunda Local Government. This was achieved through a public education program launched by the medical social workers. Since the commencement of counselling services, there has been a significant reduction in the cases of alcohol and drug abuse in the local government areas of Osun State. The above response aligns with McDonald's (2023) position that medical social workers are professionally charged with assisting patients in understanding their health conditions through counselling services. Therefore, based on the above narration, McDonald's (2023) affirmation justifies the responses obtained from the KII, as it found positive responses regarding medical social workers' efforts to curb alcohol and drug abuse in the Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State. This has been achieved through regular counselling services provided by medical social workers in the council area. For the researcher to probe further whether the reduction in alcohol and drug abuse in Olorunda Local Government was a result of professional counselling of medical social workers, the above responses also validated research question two that medical social workers did well in the cause of curtailing alcohol and drug abuse to the barest minimum in the council area.

Effectiveness of medical social workers' referrals to specialized treatment centers in ensuring continuity of care for individuals with substance use disorder in the council area

This discussion is on research question three, designed to establish how effective the medical social workers' referrals to specialized treatment centers are in ensuring continuity of care for individuals with substance use disorder in the council area. The response to this research question came from the KII conducted.

One of the respondents asserted that:

It is effective because it facilitates timely access to specialized treatment centers and reduces wait times for patients, which contributes to the improvement of treatment outcomes of substance use disorder in our community. Referrals to specialized treatment centers also help ensure

individuals receive the appropriate level of care, whether inpatient, outpatient, or intensive outpatient treatment (KII/CL, 2025).

Another respondent among medical social workers stated that:

Yes, our referral system works perfectly because it has assisted us in coordinating well-care treatment for illicit drug users to ensure that individuals receive comprehensive and continuous care services. It also encourages individuals to attend treatment when referred by a trusted healthcare professional at existing public health facilities. Also, when cases are reported to a medical social welfare agency, we sometimes take proactive steps to refer them to specialized treatment facilities within the local government (KII/MSW II, 2025).

Also, a respondent reported that:

Yes, we usually refer patients to medical social workers' treatment centers for physiotherapy and counselling services. This has helped us increase engagement in treatment, as individuals typically attend sessions at the centers when our healthcare professional makes referrals. The referral strategy also strengthens the relationship between our healthcare center and the medical social workers' counselling unit in the local government (KII/MHO, 2025).

It was posited by another respondent that:

The referral strategy of medical social workers promotes clear communication between the treatment centers and our agency, which has constitutional mandates to enforce alcohol and drug abuse laws in Nigeria. It assisted in ensuring that the needs to reduce drug abuse are met and also promoted regular follow-up and monitoring by medical social workers. It has led to improved treatment outcomes, including reduced substance use and improved mental health status among people (KII/NDA, 2025).

From the responses above, it is not an understatement to say that medical social workers' referrals to specialized treatment centers in Olorunda Local Government are working effectively, thereby improving treatment outcomes by reducing substance use in the local government. As posited by Allnock and Hutchinson (2014), effective referrals can ensure adequate care for individuals who may not have sought treatment through well-coordinated care. This can reduce healthcare costs by avoiding unnecessary hospitalizations and emergency department visits. With a medical referral system, medical social workers can establish long-lasting relationships with other treatment centers, facilitating smooth referrals and patient transitions. Allnock and Hutchinson (2014) aver that the referral strategy also promotes a clear communication system between medical social workers and treatment centers. Individual patients can ensure that rehabilitation needs are met with clear expectations. The strategy also enhanced community

engagement. Therefore, with responses from the KII conducted and supported with literature, medical social workers' referrals to specialized treatment centers in ensuring continuity of care for individuals with substance use disorder in Olorunda Local Government are working perfectly and have contributed significantly to the medical social workers' response to alcohol and drug abuse in the council area.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having examined medical social workers' response to alcohol and drug abuse in Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State, the evidence shows that medical social workers contributed to reducing illicit drug consumption in the local government through positive outcome intervention strategy to underlying mental issues that contributed to substance abuse; the article also revealed that medical social workers' responses assisted in educating those who engage in drug abuse on the need to refrain from the act. This affirms the position of Ozioma (2018), who argues that local government administrations have been contributing to drug and alcohol abuse through counselling and awareness support programmes undertaken by medical social workers on behalf of the government at the grassroots level. As revealed in the article, medical social workers play crucial roles in identifying individuals at risk of substance abuse in Olorunda Local Government. The services usually embark on treatment services at the healthcare facilities provided within the council area. This has been successful through community-based initiatives, such as peer support programs and community clean-up initiatives, to address alcohol and drug abuse in the council area. As noted by George (2023), medical social workers also partner with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to provide services, such as counselling, rehabilitation, and job training, to promote good health and social conduct. This has been successfully done with the community organizations that formulated effective strategies to control alcohol and drug abuse in the council area. This, in addition to promoting community-based health awareness programmes, community-based sensitization on drug abuse, and cost-effective strategies to implement effective institutional policy measures towards curtailing alcohol and drug abuse in the council area. As part of their core mandate, the local government regulates alcohol consumption, particularly among young people and vulnerable populations. George (2023) avers that Olorunda Local Government also partners with the higher authority to adopt a pricing policy strategy through an increased tax system on alcoholic beverages to reduce demand for illicit drug consumption at the grassroots level. With the support of medical social workers, the local government usually engages the people on the need to do away with illicit drugs through health education programs. Medical social workers' engagement in the eradication of alcohol and drug abuse is part of social responsibility aimed at addressing the drug consumption habits of the people in the council area. Osun State government also set up youth-friendly centers in all Local Government Areas (LGAs) to provide a safe space for relaxation, recreation, and engagement in productive activities, thereby reducing the likelihood of substance abuse. Olujobi (2024) sees it as a community-based support network involving parents, educators, healthcare professionals, and local leaders assisting the government in providing education support and resources to individuals affected by substance abuse. This is also in addition to the formation of drug-free clubs and support groups to educate and support individuals affected by substance abuse in the council area. This is to implement effective strategies for preventing and controlling substance abuse, including enforcement, prevention, and rehabilitation programs within the council area.

However, despite the commendable contributions of medical social workers to reduce alcohol and drug abuse in Olorunda, responses from KII established that there was a significant

reduction in substance abuse in the council area because of a series of public enlightenment programmes embarked upon by the medical social workers. The study further revealed that it is not an understatement to argue that medical social workers collaborate with other law enforcement agencies about illicit drug control in Nigeria. Arising from the findings and conclusion, this research work therefore recommends the need for regular training and workshops on substance abuse and case management for medical social workers in Nigeria. This can be achieved through specialized certifications in substance abuse treatment through community-based initiatives that will provide education, support, and resources for individuals struggling with substance abuse in Nigeria. There is also a need for a study to be conducted on how medical social workers can integrate their activities through awareness of the effects and challenges of drug and substance abuse among community members in Nigeria.

NOTE

KII/MSW I - Key Informant Interview for Medical Social Worker I

KII/MSW II - Key Informant Interview for Medical Social Worker II

KII/CL - Key Informant Interview for Community Leader

KII/MHO - Key Informant Interview for Medical Health Officer

KII/NDA - Key Informant Interview for National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies Official

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