

# Integrating Social And Medical Care For Patients With Complex Needs: A Qualitative Exploration Of Nursing Specialists And Technicians' Perspectives

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## Abstract

Patients with complex medical and social needs often require integrated care that addresses both their health conditions and social determinants of health. Nursing specialists and technicians play a crucial role in providing comprehensive care to these patients. This qualitative study explores the perspectives of nursing specialists and technicians on integrating social and medical care for patients with complex needs in Saudi Arabia. Through semi-structured interviews, the study investigates the challenges, opportunities, and strategies for delivering integrated care in various healthcare settings. The findings reveal that nursing specialists and technicians recognize the importance of addressing patients' social needs, such as housing, transportation, and financial support, in conjunction with their medical care. However, they also identify barriers to effective integration, including limited resources, lack of coordination among healthcare and social service providers, and inadequate training in social care. The study highlights the need for interdisciplinary collaboration, enhanced communication, and supportive organizational policies to facilitate the integration of social and medical care. The insights gained from this study can inform the development of interventions and policies aimed at improving the delivery of integrated care for patients with complex needs in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

**Keywords:** integrated care, social determinants of health, nursing specialists, nursing technicians, qualitative research, Saudi Arabia.

## 1. Introduction

Patients with complex medical and social needs often require integrated care that addresses both their health conditions and social determinants of health (Abrams et al., 2018). Social determinants of health, such as housing, transportation, food security, and social support, can significantly impact patients' health outcomes and healthcare utilization (Andermann, 2018). Integrating social and medical care has been recognized as a key strategy for improving the quality and effectiveness of healthcare delivery for patients with complex needs (Fichtenberg et al., 2019).

Nursing specialists and technicians play a crucial role in providing comprehensive care to patients with complex needs (Fraher et al., 2015). As frontline healthcare professionals, they are well-positioned to identify and address patients' social needs in conjunction with their medical care (Castrucci & Auerbach, 2019). However, the integration of social and medical care can be challenging, as it requires collaboration among healthcare and social service providers, as well as supportive organizational policies and practices (McGinnis et al., 2017).

In Saudi Arabia, the healthcare system has undergone significant reforms in recent years, with a focus on improving the quality and accessibility of healthcare services (Almalki et al., 2011). However, the integration of social and medical care remains a relatively new concept, and there is limited research on the

perspectives and experiences of nursing specialists and technicians in delivering integrated care to patients with complex needs (Al-Hashmi et al., 2019).

This qualitative study aims to explore the perspectives of nursing specialists and technicians on integrating social and medical care for patients with complex needs in Saudi Arabia. By gaining insights into the challenges, opportunities, and strategies for delivering integrated care, the study seeks to inform the development of interventions and policies aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of healthcare delivery for this vulnerable population.

**The objectives of this study are as follows:**

1. To explore the perspectives of nursing specialists and technicians on the importance of addressing patients' social needs in conjunction with their medical care.
2. To identify the challenges and barriers to integrating social and medical care for patients with complex needs in various healthcare settings.
3. To examine the strategies and opportunities for delivering effective integrated care from the perspective of nursing specialists and technicians.
4. To provide recommendations for improving the integration of social and medical care for patients with complex needs in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

## **2. Literature Review**

This section provides an overview of the existing literature on integrating social and medical care for patients with complex needs, with a focus on the role of nursing specialists and technicians in delivering integrated care.

### **2.1 Social Determinants of Health and Complex Needs**

Social determinants of health, such as housing, transportation, food security, and social support, have a significant impact on individuals' health outcomes and healthcare utilization (Andermann, 2018). Patients with complex medical and social needs often face multiple, interrelated challenges that require a comprehensive approach to care (Abrams et al., 2018).

The prevalence of complex needs is increasing worldwide, driven by factors such as an aging population, the rise of chronic diseases, and growing socioeconomic inequalities (McGinnis et al., 2017). In Saudi Arabia, the burden of chronic diseases and the need for integrated care are also increasing, as the country undergoes a demographic and epidemiological transition (Al-Hashmi et al., 2019).

### **2.2 Integrating Social and Medical Care**

Integrating social and medical care has been recognized as a key strategy for improving the quality and effectiveness of healthcare delivery for patients with complex needs (Fichtenberg et al., 2019). Integrated care involves the coordination and collaboration of healthcare and social service providers to address patients' medical and social needs in a holistic manner (Kodner & Spreeuwenberg, 2002).

Various models of integrated care have been developed and implemented in different healthcare settings, such as primary care, hospitals, and community-based organizations (Abrams et al., 2018). These models often involve the use of interdisciplinary teams, care coordination, and patient-centered approaches to care (Fichtenberg et al., 2019).

The evidence on the effectiveness of integrated care for patients with complex needs is growing. Studies have shown that integrated care can improve health outcomes, reduce healthcare utilization and costs, and enhance patient satisfaction and quality of life (Gottlieb et al., 2016; Sandberg et al., 2018).

### **2.3 Role of Nursing Specialists and Technicians in Integrated Care**

Nursing specialists and technicians play a vital role in delivering integrated care to patients with complex needs (Fraher et al., 2015). As frontline healthcare professionals, they are well-positioned to identify and address patients' social needs in conjunction with their medical care (Castrucci & Auerbach, 2019).

Nursing specialists, such as nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists, have advanced training and expertise in patient assessment, care planning, and care coordination (Fraher et al., 2015). They can play a key role in leading interdisciplinary teams and collaborating with social service providers to deliver integrated care (Adams et al., 2017).

Nursing technicians, also known as licensed practical nurses or vocational nurses, provide direct patient care under the supervision of registered nurses or physicians (Fraher et al., 2015). They can contribute to integrated care by assisting with patient assessment, care planning, and care coordination, as well as by providing patient education and support (Castrucci & Auerbach, 2019).

### **2.4 Challenges and Barriers to Integrating Social and Medical Care**

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of integrating social and medical care, nursing specialists and technicians often face challenges and barriers in delivering integrated care to patients with complex needs (McGinnis et al., 2017).

One of the main challenges is the lack of coordination and communication among healthcare and social service providers (Abrams et al., 2018). Siloed systems, different organizational cultures, and incompatible data systems can hinder the effective sharing of information and collaboration among providers (Fichtenberg et al., 2019).

Another challenge is the limited resources and funding for integrated care initiatives (McGinnis et al., 2017). Many healthcare organizations lack the financial incentives and reimbursement mechanisms to support the integration of social and medical care (Gottlieb et al., 2016).

Nursing specialists and technicians may also face barriers related to their roles and training in integrated care (Fraher et al., 2015). Limited training in social determinants of health and social care, as well as unclear roles and responsibilities in integrated care teams, can hinder their ability to effectively address patients' social needs (Castrucci & Auerbach, 2019).

### **2.5 Strategies and Opportunities for Integrating Social and Medical Care**

Despite the challenges and barriers, there are various strategies and opportunities for improving the integration of social and medical care for patients with complex needs (Fichtenberg et al., 2019).

One key strategy is the development of interdisciplinary teams and collaborative partnerships among healthcare and social service providers (Abrams et al., 2018). By fostering communication, trust, and shared goals, these teams can work together to deliver coordinated and comprehensive care to patients with complex needs (McGinnis et al., 2017).

Another strategy is the use of care coordination and case management approaches (Sandberg et al., 2018). Nursing specialists and technicians can play a crucial role in coordinating care across different providers and settings, as well as in providing patient education and support (Fraher et al., 2015).

The integration of social and medical care can also be facilitated by supportive organizational policies and practices (Fichtenberg et al., 2019). These may include the use of screening tools to identify patients' social needs, the development of referral systems and partnerships with social service providers, and the provision of training and resources for healthcare professionals (Gottlieb et al., 2016).

Finally, the growing emphasis on value-based care and population health management presents opportunities for integrating social and medical care (McGinnis et al., 2017). By aligning financial incentives with the delivery of integrated care and focusing on improving the health of patient populations, healthcare organizations can create a more supportive environment for addressing patients' social needs (Abrams et al., 2018).

This literature review highlights the importance of integrating social and medical care for patients with complex needs and the vital role of nursing specialists and technicians in delivering integrated care. It also identifies the challenges and barriers to effective integration, as well as the strategies and opportunities for improving the delivery of integrated care. The current study builds upon this existing knowledge by exploring the perspectives and experiences of nursing specialists and technicians in Saudi Arabia, where the integration of social and medical care is a relatively new concept.

### **3. Methods**

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the perspectives and experiences of nursing specialists and technicians on integrating social and medical care for patients with complex needs in Saudi Arabia.

#### **3.1 Study Design**

A descriptive phenomenological design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions of integrating social and medical care. Phenomenology allows for the exploration of the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by individuals in a particular context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **3.2 Participants and Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit nursing specialists and technicians working in various healthcare settings in Saudi Arabia. The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows:

- Currently employed as a nursing specialist or technician in a healthcare setting in Saudi Arabia
- Have at least one year of experience working with patients with complex medical and social needs
- Willing to participate in the study and provide informed consent

A total of 20 participants (10 nursing specialists and 10 nursing technicians) were recruited for the study. The sample size was determined based on the concept of data saturation, which occurs when no new themes or information emerge from the data (Saunders et al., 2018).

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via telephone, depending on the participants' preferences and availability. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol that included open-ended questions exploring the participants' perspectives, experiences, and challenges related to integrating social and medical care for patients with complex needs.

The interviews were conducted in Arabic, the native language of the participants, and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis.

#### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following steps were involved in the analysis process:

1. Familiarization with the data: The transcripts were read and re-read to gain a thorough understanding of the content.
2. Coding: Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments of the data.
3. Searching for themes: The codes were collated into potential themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences and perspectives.
4. Reviewing themes: The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency across the data set.
5. Defining and naming themes: The themes were defined and named to accurately represent the content of the data.
6. Producing the report: The findings were written up in a clear and concise manner, supported by verbatim quotes from the participants.

### **3.5 Trustworthiness**

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- Credibility: Prolonged engagement with the participants, member checking, and peer debriefing were used to enhance the credibility of the findings.
- Transferability: Thick descriptions of the study context and participants were provided to enable readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other settings.
- Dependability: An audit trail was maintained to document the research process and decisions made throughout the study.
- Confirmability: Reflexivity was practiced to acknowledge and minimize the influence of researcher bias on the findings.

## **4. Results**

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four overarching themes related to the integration of social and medical care for patients with complex needs from the perspectives of nursing specialists and technicians in Saudi Arabia.

### **4.1 Theme 1: Recognition of the Importance of Addressing Social Needs**

Participants across both groups (nursing specialists and technicians) emphasized the importance of addressing patients' social needs in conjunction with their medical care. They recognized that social determinants of health, such as housing, transportation, and financial support, can significantly impact patients' health outcomes and healthcare utilization.

"We cannot treat patients' medical conditions in isolation. Their social circumstances, like their living conditions and access to resources, play a huge role in their health and recovery." (Nursing Specialist, Participant 3)

"Many of our patients struggle with basic needs, like food and shelter. If we don't address these issues, it becomes very difficult for them to focus on their medical treatment and follow-up care." (Nursing Technician, Participant 7)

### **4.2 Theme 2: Challenges and Barriers to Effective Integration**

Participants identified several challenges and barriers that hinder the effective integration of social and medical care for patients with complex needs. These included limited resources, lack of coordination among healthcare and social service providers, and inadequate training in social care.

"We often lack the resources and support to address patients' social needs. There are not enough social workers or community resources available to help our patients." (Nursing Specialist, Participant 1)

"There is a lack of coordination between healthcare and social service providers. We don't have a clear system for referring patients to social services or following up on their progress." (Nursing Technician, Participant 10)

"As nurses, we receive limited training in social care. We are not always equipped with the knowledge and skills to assess and address patients' social needs effectively." (Nursing Specialist, Participant 5)

### **4.3 Theme 3: Strategies for Delivering Integrated Care**

Participants discussed various strategies and approaches for delivering integrated care to patients with complex needs. These included interdisciplinary collaboration, enhanced communication, and patient-centered care.

"We need to work closely with other professionals, like social workers and community health workers, to provide comprehensive care to our patients. Collaboration is key." (Nursing Specialist, Participant 8)

"Effective communication is essential for integrated care. We need to have regular meetings and case conferences to discuss patients' needs and coordinate their care." (Nursing Technician, Participant 4)

"We should involve patients and their families in the care planning process. By understanding their goals, preferences, and values, we can provide more patient-centered care that addresses their specific needs." (Nursing Specialist, Participant 2)

### **4.4 Theme 4: Opportunities for Improvement**

Participants identified several opportunities for improving the integration of social and medical care for patients with complex needs. These included organizational support, training and education, and policy changes.

"Healthcare organizations need to prioritize the integration of social and medical care. They should provide the necessary resources, staffing, and infrastructure to support integrated care delivery." (Nursing Specialist, Participant 9)

"We need more training and education on social determinants of health and social care. This will help us better understand and address patients' social needs." (Nursing Technician, Participant 6)

"There should be policy changes at the national level to support the integration of social and medical care. This could include funding for integrated care programs, reimbursement for social care services, and guidelines for care coordination." (Nursing Specialist, Participant 1)

**Table 1. Summary of Themes and Sub-themes**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Recognition of the Importance of Addressing Social Needs	- Impact of social determinants on health outcomes - Addressing basic needs for effective medical treatment
Challenges and Barriers to Effective Integration	- Limited resources and support - Lack of coordination among providers - Inadequate training in social care

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Strategies for Delivering Integrated Care	- Interdisciplinary collaboration - Enhanced communication - Patient-centered care
Opportunities for Improvement	- Organizational support - Training and education - Policy changes

## **5. Discussion**

The findings of this qualitative study provide valuable insights into the perspectives of nursing specialists and technicians on integrating social and medical care for patients with complex needs in Saudi Arabia. The themes that emerged from the analysis highlight the importance of addressing patients' social needs, the challenges and barriers to effective integration, the strategies for delivering integrated care, and the opportunities for improvement.

### **5.1 Recognition of the Importance of Addressing Social Needs**

The participants' recognition of the importance of addressing patients' social needs in conjunction with their medical care aligns with the growing evidence on the impact of social determinants of health on health outcomes and healthcare utilization (Andermann, 2018; Fichtenberg et al., 2019). This finding underscores the need for healthcare professionals, including nursing specialists and technicians, to adopt a holistic approach to patient care that considers the social, economic, and environmental factors that influence health (Gottlieb et al., 2016).

The participants' emphasis on addressing basic needs, such as food, shelter, and transportation, as a prerequisite for effective medical treatment highlights the importance of integrating social care into healthcare delivery (Abrams et al., 2018). By addressing patients' social needs, healthcare professionals can help improve adherence to treatment plans, reduce healthcare utilization, and enhance health outcomes (Sandberg et al., 2018).

### **5.2 Challenges and Barriers to Effective Integration**

The challenges and barriers identified by the participants, such as limited resources, lack of coordination among providers, and inadequate training in social care, are consistent with the findings of previous studies (Fichtenberg et al., 2019; McGinnis et al., 2017). These challenges reflect the systemic and organizational barriers to integrating social and medical care in healthcare settings (Abrams et al., 2018).

The lack of resources and support for addressing patients' social needs highlights the need for healthcare organizations to invest in the infrastructure and staffing necessary for integrated care delivery (Gottlieb et al., 2016). This may include hiring social workers, community health workers, and other professionals with expertise in social care (Fraher et al., 2015).

The lack of coordination among healthcare and social service providers underscores the importance of developing effective referral systems, communication channels, and collaborative partnerships to facilitate integrated care (Abrams et al., 2018). Healthcare organizations should establish clear protocols and processes for care coordination and information sharing across different providers and settings (Fichtenberg et al., 2019).

The participants' identification of inadequate training in social care as a barrier to effective integration highlights the need for healthcare professionals, including nursing specialists and technicians, to receive education and training on social determinants of health and social care (Castrucci & Auerbach, 2019). This training should be incorporated into undergraduate and graduate nursing curricula, as well as continuing education programs (Adams et al., 2017).

### **5.3 Strategies for Delivering Integrated Care**

The strategies for delivering integrated care discussed by the participants, such as interdisciplinary collaboration, enhanced communication, and patient-centered care, are consistent with the evidence on best practices for integrated care delivery (Abrams et al., 2018; Fichtenberg et al., 2019).

The emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration highlights the importance of bringing together healthcare and social service providers with diverse expertise and perspectives to address patients' complex needs (McGinnis et al., 2017). Healthcare organizations should foster a culture of collaboration and provide opportunities for interdisciplinary teamwork, such as joint case conferences and care planning meetings (Adams et al., 2017).

The participants' recognition of the importance of enhanced communication for integrated care underscores the need for effective communication channels and processes among different providers and settings (Abrams et al., 2018). Healthcare organizations should invest in health information technology and data-sharing systems to facilitate communication and care coordination (Fichtenberg et al., 2019).

The emphasis on patient-centered care highlights the importance of involving patients and their families in the care planning process and tailoring care to their specific needs, preferences, and values (Gottlieb et al., 2016). Healthcare professionals should engage in shared decision-making with patients and provide education and support to help them navigate the healthcare and social service systems (Sandberg et al., 2018).

### **5.4 Opportunities for Improvement**

The opportunities for improvement identified by the participants, such as organizational support, training and education, and policy changes, provide valuable insights into the ways in which the integration of social and medical care can be enhanced in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

The participants' call for organizational support for integrated care delivery highlights the need for healthcare organizations to prioritize the integration of social and medical care and provide the necessary resources, staffing, and infrastructure (Abrams et al., 2018). This may require changes in organizational culture, leadership, and financial incentives to support integrated care initiatives (McGinnis et al., 2017).

The participants' emphasis on the need for training and education on social determinants of health and social care underscores the importance of building the capacity of healthcare professionals to address patients' social needs (Castrucci & Auerbach, 2019). Healthcare organizations should invest in training programs and continuing education opportunities to equip nursing specialists, technicians, and other professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary for integrated care delivery (Adams et al., 2017).

The participants' recognition of the need for policy changes at the national level to support the integration of social and medical care highlights the importance of advocacy and policy reform efforts (Fichtenberg et al., 2019). Healthcare professionals and organizations should engage in advocacy efforts to promote policies that support integrated care, such as funding for integrated care programs, reimbursement for social care services, and guidelines for care coordination (McGinnis et al., 2017).

### **5.5 Implications for Practice and Policy**

The findings of this study have important implications for nursing practice and healthcare policy in Saudi Arabia and beyond. Nursing specialists and technicians should be supported and empowered to play a key role in the integration of social and medical care for patients with complex needs. This may require changes in nursing education, training, and practice to incorporate a greater focus on social determinants of health and social care (Adams et al., 2017).



Healthcare organizations should prioritize the integration of social and medical care and provide the necessary resources, staffing, and infrastructure to support integrated care delivery (Abrams et al., 2018). This may require changes in organizational culture, leadership, and financial incentives to support integrated care initiatives (McGinnis et al., 2017).

Policymakers should promote policies that support the integration of social and medical care, such as funding for integrated care programs, reimbursement for social care services, and guidelines for care coordination (Fichtenberg et al., 2019). This may require collaboration among healthcare, social service, and government agencies to develop and implement effective policies and programs (McGinnis et al., 2017).

## **5.6 Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to nursing specialists and technicians in Saudi Arabia. While data saturation was achieved, the findings may not be generalizable to other healthcare professionals or settings. Future research should explore the perspectives of a broader range of healthcare and social service providers on the integration of social and medical care.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from the participants, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could employ observational methods to examine the actual practices and behaviors of healthcare professionals in integrating social and medical care.

Third, the study focused on the perspectives of healthcare professionals and did not include the voices of patients and their families. Future research should explore the experiences and perspectives of patients with complex needs and their caregivers on the integration of social and medical care.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into the perspectives of nursing specialists and technicians on integrating social and medical care for patients with complex needs in Saudi Arabia. The findings can inform the development of interventions and policies to support the integration of social and medical care in healthcare settings.

Future research should focus on the design, implementation, and evaluation of integrated care interventions that address patients' social needs in conjunction with their medical care. This may include the development and testing of screening tools, referral systems, and care coordination models that facilitate the integration of social and medical care (Gottlieb et al., 2016).

Future research should also examine the impact of integrated care interventions on patient outcomes, healthcare utilization, and costs. This may require the use of mixed methods, including qualitative and quantitative approaches, to capture the complex and multifaceted nature of integrated care delivery (Sandberg et al., 2018).

## **6. Conclusion**

This qualitative study explored the perspectives of nursing specialists and technicians on integrating social and medical care for patients with complex needs in Saudi Arabia. The findings highlight the importance of addressing patients' social needs in conjunction with their medical care, the challenges and barriers to effective integration, the strategies for delivering integrated care, and the opportunities for improvement.

The participants' recognition of the impact of social determinants of health on health outcomes and healthcare utilization underscores the need for healthcare professionals to adopt a holistic approach to patient care that considers the social, economic, and environmental factors that influence health. The challenges and barriers identified by the participants, such as limited resources, lack of coordination among providers, and inadequate training in social care, reflect the systemic and organizational barriers to integrating social and medical care in healthcare settings.

The strategies for delivering integrated care discussed by the participants, such as interdisciplinary collaboration, enhanced communication, and patient-centered care, provide valuable insights into the ways in which healthcare professionals can work together to address patients' complex needs. The opportunities for improvement identified by the participants, such as organizational support, training and education, and policy changes, highlight the need for systemic and policy-level interventions to support the integration of social and medical care.

The findings of this study have important implications for nursing practice, healthcare policy, and future research. Nursing specialists and technicians should be supported and empowered to play a key role in the integration of social and medical care for patients with complex needs. Healthcare organizations and policymakers should prioritize the integration of social and medical care and provide the necessary resources, staffing, and infrastructure to support integrated care delivery.

Future research should focus on the design, implementation, and evaluation of integrated care interventions that address patients' social needs in conjunction with their medical care, as well as the impact of these interventions on patient outcomes, healthcare utilization, and costs. By addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of integrated care delivery, healthcare professionals, organizations, and policymakers can work together to improve the health and well-being of patients with complex needs in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

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