

Status of Drug Addicts In The Context of Covid-19 in Vietnam: Roles of Social Support Worker

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Abstract

The Covid19 epidemic is an infectious disease pandemic, with the agent being the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which is currently affecting all aspects of the economy, politics, and society in the world. Clearly disadvantaged groups, including drug addiction, have been affected the most. The survey was conducted at methadone treatment facilities in Hanoi, Hai Phong, and Thai Nguyen with the aim of analyzing the effects of the Covid-19 epidemic on drug addicts. Based on the assessment of these impacts, the article will discuss specialized interventions based on social support worker's roles to support drug addicts. The survey results have shown that the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic has had a negative impact on the health, employment, income, and psychological aspects of drug addicts. Professional discussions also demonstrate that social support activities have an important and comprehensive role in supporting drug addicts to overcome difficulties in this Covid-19 context.

Keywords: Drug addicts; Status; Covid-19, Role, Social worker support

I. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic is currently affecting the world. In addition to causing a series of deaths in the world, the Covid-19 epidemic has also caused many social consequences such as an increasing unemployment, putting strong pressure on ensuring security, income, and employment on both national and international scale, stress, domestic violence, substance abuse are also increasing (Statistics of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Women's Union, 2020). According to the preliminary assessment report of the International Labor Organization (ILO): "Covid-19 and the world of work: Impacts and solutions", the economic and labor crisis caused by the Covid-19 epidemic could add 25 million more unemployed people globally, compared with 188 million available unemployed in 2019. In addition, the impact of the Covid epidemic will most likely be on the weak and vulnerable groups in society, including drug addicts.

The current drug addiction problem in Vietnam is still complicated. With the efforts of the government as well as the mass organizations, drug addicts are now receiving

support and interventions in the treatment of addiction, such as participating in Methadone treatment at facilities or other social supports. However, since the Covid epidemic, along with the social distancing, has caused many difficulties for drug addicts in the treatment of addiction, it is necessary to have studies to find out appropriate intervention and support in this context. The study was conducted in 3 facilities in Vietnam as: Methadone treatment facility, Dong Da district - Hanoi; Thanh Xuan School of Social Labor - Hai Phong and Voluntary Counseling and Treatment Center - Thai Nguyen aim to analyze the impacts of the Covid epidemic on drug addicts. Base on that, this article gives meaningful and professional discussions on interventions related to social support for drug addicts in the context of this epidemic.

Research Methods

- Document analysis

The survey uses research methods and document analysis to provide a general description of the Covid-19 epidemic situation in Vietnam as well as programs and policies to support people in general and drug addicts in particular. The documents collected and analyzed by the research team are the policies issued by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Health, etc., as well as the legal documents related to the support and guidance for treatment. Addiction treatment in the context of Covid19. In addition, documents related to researches, surveys as well as other documents of UNODC, SAMSHA, SCDI... in the field of research treatment are also consulted to have grounds in analyzing and proposing solutions.

- In-depth interview

The research conducted a number of in-depth interviews with leaders in the field of addiction treatment; Drug addiction treatment facilities as well as drug addicts. The purpose of the in-depth interview is to obtain specific information and comments on aspects of perspectives, support policies as well as difficulties and challenges of researchers as well as addiction treatment facilities in the context of addiction treatment. Covid19. The information from the in-depth interview results will help us gain a deeper insight into the research problem so that we can offer useful solutions to support addicts and addiction treatment facilities to respond effectively. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.



Concretely, the research conducted in-depth interviews with a leader of the Department of Social Evils Prevention, 6 addiction treatment staff at methadone facilities, 10 drug addicts.

- *Questionnaire*

In order to collect information objectively based on the opinions of drug addicts, the research distributed questionnaires to drug addicts who are currently using services at 3 research sites. The research sample distributed was 120 questionnaires at 3 facilities. After reviewing, 19 invalid questionnaires or too little information should be discarded. The remaining valid questionnaires were 101 questionnaires, which were analyzed using SPSS 20 software.

II. FINDINGS OF RESEARCHES

- *Employment status of drug addicts*

In Vietnam, the Covid-19 epidemic that appeared from the end of January 2020 has had a great impact on the production, business situation, and employment of workers, causing a decrease in labor market participation, unemployment and underemployment increased. According to the General Statistics Office, workers with informal jobs, workers without contracts, low-income workers, young workers, and elderly workers are the most vulnerable groups due to the pandemic of Covid-19. The results of the Labor and Employment Survey in the first quarter of 2020 showed that the labor force participation rate is the lowest in the past 10 years. Unemployment has increased, the underemployment rate of working-age workers is at the highest level in the last 5 years. Data from the General Statistics Office (2020) showed that the unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2020 was 2.22%, up 0.07% over the previous quarter and 0.05% over the same period last year.

Together with this situation, for drug addicts, previous studies have shown that one of the most difficult and challenging problems they often face is the problem of employment. Therefore, when the general employment context is negatively affected by the Covid-19 epidemic, drug addicts are also affected significantly.

The result shows that the main jobs of drug addicts are a small businesses, motorbike taxi drivers, hired workers for service shops, etc. These are the occupation groups most affected by the Covid epidemic. The results show that the rate of drug addicts losing their jobs is the highest, accounting for 31.7%. In addition, due to the epidemic, the work of 23.8% of drug addicts became instability. However, there are also 14.9% who think they have a better job. These are the people who switch to doing online business.

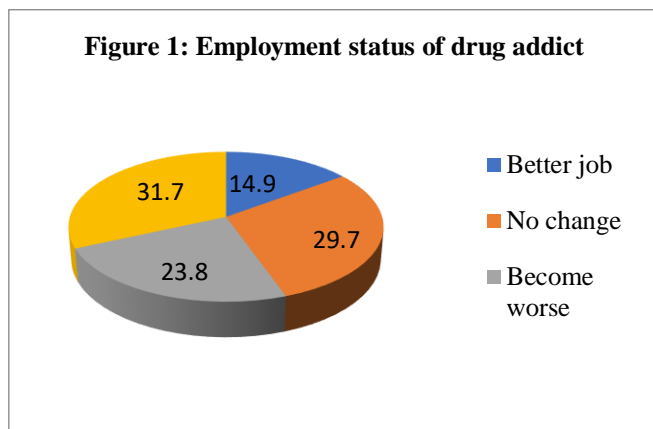
Going deeper into this issue, drug addicts said that their jobs become instability and even lose their jobs because social distancing causes some shops to close, so their business is also affected or had to temporarily stop. Some employees in small shops were no longer employed by their owners. Or even running a motorbike taxi or taxi is also difficult when they have almost no customers because few people go out. The driver also had to stop because the bus station was closed.

The remaining percentage also think that their jobs have become much more unstable since the Covid19 epidemic. One of the reasons is that they themselves are afraid of the disease, so they also limit going out and participating in professional activities because if they get sick, they will immediately spread it to their relatives in the family. However, some argue that if they are equipped with the necessary prevention equipment, they will feel more secure when they need to participate in employment activities.

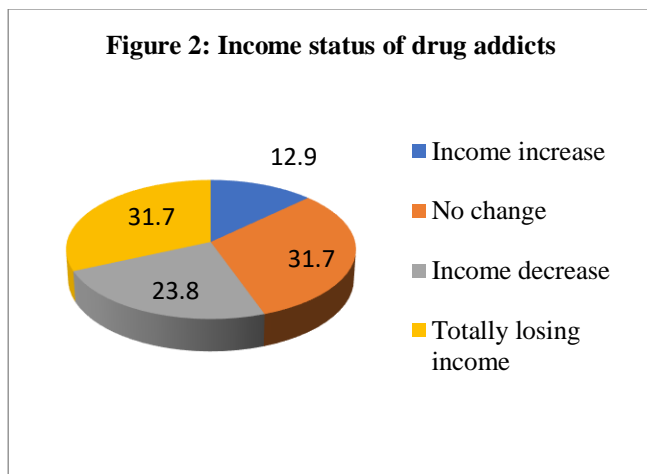
Losing a job could lead to “a lot of free time”. Even an unstable job situation will lead to depression and stress for drug addicts. These negative psychological states are one of the causes of relapse or difficulty in keeping clean. Therefore, it is necessary to have timely interventions to avoid negative consequences for drug addicts.

- *Income status of drug addicts*

Stemming from the above employment situation, the income of drug addicts is also significantly affected by the Covid19 epidemic. Specifically, their income status is shown in Figure 2. The results show that up to 31.7% of addicts have completely lost their income, and 23.8% have lost their income. Previous research results and reports show that the income and economic situation of drug addicts are not high. Their income was not high, while they still had to pay for daily living expenses as well as family work.



Source: Finding of this research, 2020



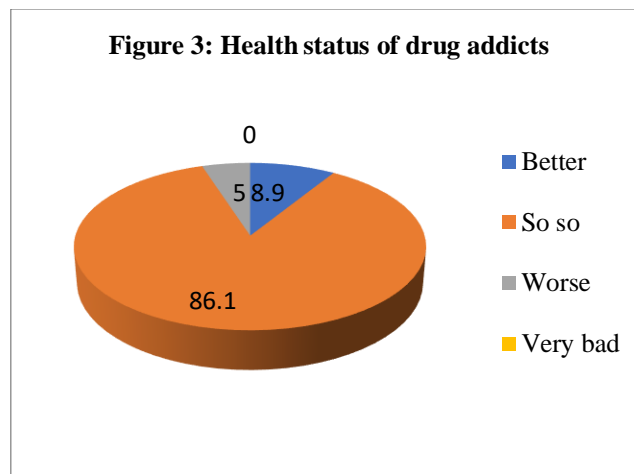
Source: Finding of this research, 2020

The reason why addicts' income status is so affected is that their work is also greatly affected in the Covid context. Specifically, as analyzed above, their customers are significantly reduced due to the implementation of social distancing. Almost all customers today only buy essential items for daily life. The fact that people did not go out to the streets, so the number of customers decreased a lot. Only those who do business online are still guaranteed income. In fact, even in the normal context, finding a job is already difficult for them, so in the context of the general economic difficulty, it is clear that the employment problem of drug addicts will be a big challenge

Now in Vietnam, almost all drug treatment intervention is socialization. It means drug addicts have to pay even small partly for treatments. However, when there is no job, they do not have money for their daily life; thus, how could they pay for treatment? This situation would lead to negative consequences for drug addicts and even their families. To solve the problem of reducing income as well as employment, drug addicts will need to have access to resources as well as supportive policies. In addition, the ability of addicts to cope in finding solutions to this problem should also be enhanced to support drug addicts in dealing with this problem.

- **Health status of drug addicts**

One of the issues that also need attention is the Covid19 epidemic is the health of drug addicts. If health is affected, this will obviously also negatively impact job search activities, income improvement as well as other daily activities.



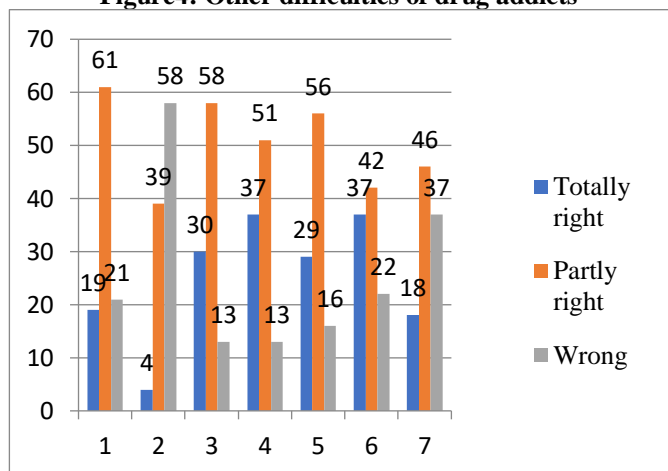
Source: Finding of this research, 2020

Weak health will also limit participation in addiction treatment activities. In addition, poor health will also cause drug addicts to have to spend a certain amount of money for medical examinations and treatment. With their jobs and incomes suffering significant losses, this will increase their burden considerably. However, the results in Figure 3 show a positive point that the health of drug addicts has not deteriorated but is still guaranteed (accounting for 86.1%). In particular, there are a few drug addicts who even feel their health improves. Specifically, due to not having a job and having to stay at home, some people have spent time doing exercise and health-promoting activities. Some people also think that now they just stay at home to eat and sleep. Not going to work, so they don't think much about the stresses of life, so my mood is more comfortable and healthier. However, it should also be noted that as analyzed above, when there is no job and a decrease in income, there is a high risk of leading to stress, fatigue, negative psychology because of life pressure, thereby also will make their health unsafe. Thus, it is also necessary to consider long-term solutions to this problem. In addition to the main problems mentioned above, in the context of the Covid-19 epidemic, drug addicts also face a number of other problems that affect their daily life in general and addiction treatment in particular. Figure 4 below will describe these difficulties in detail.

- **Other difficulties of drug addicts**

The next difficulties that drug addicts may face in the context of the Covid 19 epidemic listed here are: Psychological fatigue, stress; No time to take care of children; Difficulty in participating in social activities; Discrimination in receiving support programs/policies; Difficulties in medical examination and treatment; Lack of funds to cover living expenses; Family conflicts arise more.

Figure4: Other difficulties of drug addicts



Source: Finding of this research, 2020

1. Psychological fatigue, stress
2. No time to take care of children
3. Difficulty in participating in social activities
4. Being discriminated against in receiving support programs/policies
5. Difficulty in getting medical treatment
6. Lack of funds to cover life
7. There are more conflicts in the family

The result in figure 4 shows that problem of lack of funds to cover living expenses and Discrimination in receiving support programs/policies are the biggest difficulties/challenges which drug addicts are now facing in the context of the Covid19 epidemic. In both of these two issues, there are 37 people who completely agree and think that these are the biggest issues affecting their lives today.

Lack of funds to cover life is a problem that greatly affects drug addicts because they are facing many difficulties in employment as well as income decline due to the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic. The shared opinions all said that if the epidemic continues for a long time and they still have difficulties in finding a job, they will no longer have the funds to cover their daily activities. In this context, despite the State's attention to stabilize prices, many other living expenses still need to be paid, so they need other support from the State.

In addition, a very high percentage of drug addicts think that the prolonged Covid-19 epidemic will make their psychology tired and stressed. The comments showed that not being able to work, reduced income, as well as limited mobility to participate in social activities, made them become secretive and tired. These are negative psychology and, without effective intervention, can lead to undesirable behaviors, especially with addiction problems and possibly relapse into drug addiction.

Other issues such as Not having time to take care of children, Difficulty in going to medical examination and

treatment, Family having more disagreements... although there are fewer options, these issues still remain. In fact, these are all factors that cause difficulties in life as well as in addiction treatment activities if the context of the Covid epidemic continues for a long time.

Base on those findings of difficulties and challenges of drug addicts in the context of Covid 19, it raises a big question that how could we help drug addicts to deal with such complex problems effectively? Findings from researches show that social support is a good tool (Sharon M, 2010) and could be an effective intervention in this context (Uzma Z, 2020), (Hai N., Lien N., Bich D, 2019). So things below would discuss the role of the social support worker in helping drug addicts in the context of Covid-19.

Discuss the role of social support workers in supporting drug addicts in the context of Covid-19

It can be seen that drug addicts are facing and suffering many negative impacts in the current Covid-19 context. These negative effects will make drug addicts face many difficulties in daily life and, more seriously, increase the risk of relapse as well as hinder the effectiveness of drug addiction treatment (Horvath, Misra, Epner, 2019). Therefore, in addition to intensive interventions in addiction treatment, it is very important to have social support interventions that can help drug addicts recover and cope with the negative effects of drug addiction. Gottlieb (2000) defines social support in drug addiction treatment as an interactive process between social support workers and drug users, aimed at improving problem-solving abilities, enhancing self-esteem and trust... through connecting them to family, community, and social resources. Thereby it helps drug addicts solving problems to meet their needs and develop independently and sustainably. In the treatment of drug addiction, social support workers can be social workers, social work collaborators, unions and associations in the community, medical staff... with professional experience, knowledge, and skills for social support with substance addicts. Social support workers also interact with groups, agencies, organizations, individuals, families... to create the best supportive environment for drug addicts before, during, and after addiction treatment. Below are some of the roles social support workers can play in helping drug addicts in the context of Covid-19.

- Facilitation role

With the philosophy of support is to improve the capacity of the supported, so the social support worker has the role of a companion with drug addicts and always creates the most favorable conditions to help drug addicts solving their problems. In this role, social support workers need to undertake specific activities, such as working to remove barriers that are preventing drug users from accessing addiction services; mobilize resources to support addicts in terms of health, career, employment...; support drug addicts to participate in addiction treatment and rise up in life; assist

them in handling administrative procedures to access services in the easiest way. Thus, with this role, in the context of Covid-19, social support workers will help drug addicts have the most favorable conditions so that they can access services to meet their essential needs in their life.

- **Psychological counseling role**

With this role, social support workers will carry out sharing and psychological support activities to help drug addicts relieve stress and difficulties arising in life. Studies have shown a close relationship between stress, emotional fatigue, increasing the rate of relapse as well as limiting the effectiveness of detoxification. Therefore, the role of psychological counseling is a very important role to ensure the effectiveness of drug withdrawal and successful relapse. In the context of the Covid-19 epidemic, due to the pressures and difficulties that arise as analyzed above, it is clear that drug addicts will easily lead to negative emotions. Social support workers need to recognize, evaluate and intervene in a timely manner to help drug addicts not fall into a negative emotional state, thereby avoiding risk factors leading to relapse.

- **Resource mobilization role**

In the process of addiction treatment, together with their own efforts, drug addicts need many other resources to support them. A social support worker is someone who helps them to find and approach these resources. More important, social support workers help them to use resources effectively. Resources here include both material and spiritual resources, legal and ethical... from family, neighbors, community, and society. In fact, resource mobilization, in addition to providing support for drug addicts, also creates common awareness, as well as solidarity in the community and neighbors in supporting drug addicts. It is clear that in the context of Covid-19, as analyzed above, drug addicts face many difficulties that require many different support resources to meet essential needs in life and in treatment such as rice, water, clothes, income, job... Therefore, using this role as a social support worker will help drug addicts get some essential resources in life, thereby helping to treat addiction more effectively.

- **Advocacy role**

In this role, a social support worker is a protector of the legal rights of drug addicts, so that they can enjoy their services, policies, and rights, especially in cases where they are denied services or policies that they should be entitled to. From the view of the Right approach, it is clear that drug addicts are human beings; they have the right and need to access services and should be assured of their legitimate interests. However, due to various reasons such as discrimination, ignorance, and administrative procedures... in many cases, drug addicts are not guaranteed their legitimate rights. That limits their ability to recover as well as to integrate into the community. This is a very necessary role,

especially for drug addicts in the context of Covid-19. As analyzed above, in this context, drug addicts are greatly affected in terms of employment and income as well as access to services. Therefore, social support workers performing this role will help addicts ensure their legitimate rights and interests, thereby helping them overcome difficulties in the context of the Covid-19 epidemic.

- **Media role**

Proper understanding of drug users/addiction is very important to reduce stigma and discrimination against them, and increase empathy, sharing, support of family and social community for them, especially when they are in addiction treatment programs. When drug addicts live in a healthy environment (without stigma, discrimination...), receive maximum support from the community and those around them, their addiction treatment will be the most effective. In order to have such an environment, social support workers need to perform well their communication roles in the community and society. On the other hand, to perform this communication role, social support workers need to have strong communication skills and knowledge as well as know how to work with parties for effective communication. With this role, although it does not completely affect drug addicts directly, through the media to help the social community raise awareness about drug problems and Covid-19 will help addicts participate and engage in addiction treatment activities better.

- **Education role**

Educators are people who provide knowledge and skills related to drug knowledge, how to care for drug users, how to overcome difficult problems, other problems they need. Solve, improve the capacity of individuals, families, groups, or communities through training, educating the community so that they have understanding, confidence, and self-reflection, evaluate problems, analyze and find resources to solve their problems. Education helps them change their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors from negative to positive. This role is very important because social support workers through this role can provide and improve knowledge about Covid-19 for drug addicts and their families so that they could know how to deal with these situations even if they are infected. When they understand and have sufficient knowledge, they will have the confidence to carry out appropriate and effective detoxification activities in the context of Covid-19

III. CONCLUSION

In the context of the complicated Covid-19 epidemic in the world in general and Vietnam in particular, drug addicts are facing many difficulties, causing negative effects that reduce the effectiveness of drug addiction treatment and increased the risk of relapse. These problems are job loss, reduced income, difficulty in accessing educational, medical, and social services, etc., as well as

negative psychological and emotional problems, etc. That requires intensive and comprehensive intervention based on the role of the social support worker. With their role, social support workers will carry out activities such as propaganda, facilitation, advocacy, counseling, resource mobilization, etc., to be able to support drug addicts in the most comprehensive and effective ways in the context of the current Covid-19 epidemic.

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