Elizabeth Simpson, MSW, Social Worker, recently celebrated her first year anniversary with the Social Work Department at BIDMC.

Social Work an Integral Part of Patient Care

March is National Social Work Month and at BIDMC that means raising awareness about the important role played by social workers in helping to treat the whole patient.

"We are an important part of the health care team," said Barbara Sarnoff Lee, Director, Social Work, who notes that BIDMC has one of the longest running programs of any hospital in the United States. "We provide psycho-social services to patients and families and that means we do everything from providing mental health assessments, crisis intervention and counseling services, to assisting patients in obtaining needed resources."

Doctors and nurses know from experience just how crucial it is to have social workers as part of the clinical team.

"I feel incredibly lucky to work in a primary care practice that includes social workers," said Jennifer Potter, MD, General Medicine/HCA Women's Health. "They help our patients deal with everything from practical barriers to optimal healthcare – such as insurance or transportation challenges – to stress management techniques, to ongoing counseling concerning a grief reaction, a relationship problem, or a substance use or mental health issue. Their presence and helpful advice increase the quality of the care I am able to offer my patients immeasurably."

Elizabeth Simpson, MSW, Social Worker, sees part of her job as helping patients make the best decisions about their care. "Patients and families often feel like they don't really have a voice," said Simpson, who recently celebrated her first year anniversary at BIDMC. "I feel like part of my job is to facilitate communication and to help patients and families find their voice so they can make the best decision about what is right for them and develop better coping skills as they muddle through the whole mess of being sick."

Some things that trigger the involvement of social workers at BIDMC include:

- Patients and families who are anxious, depressed or having difficulty coping with their illness.
- Patients and families with addiction and substance abuse issues
- Patients and families with a lack of financial resources, who are homelessness, who need help accessing social security, food stamps, elder services, etc…
- Patients and families with guardianship issues.
- Patients and families with end-of-life issues.
- Patients and families facing trauma, abuse, neglect, or family violence.
- Patients and families facing ethical dilemmas, conflicts in values.

"Sometimes the family is the patient for us," said Simpson. "We support them through a variety of issues, including the grieving process or with end-of-life decisions or care."

Much of a patient's success lies with what happens after they are discharged from the hospital. "When I do an assessment of someone I try to understand them from the point of view of who they are," said Simpson. "I learn what kind of support they have at home or in the community and whether there are challenges or obstacles in meeting certain conditions and I convey that to the clinical team. I try to get the psycho-social history and convey that to the team so as humanize the patient."

If it weren't for social workers, doctors and nurses would have a much more difficult time doing their jobs.

"Social workers play an essential role in helping the clients and their families cope with multiple medical and surgical complications that need to be faced on a daily basis," said Paula Wahl, RN, Farr 2. "They share their knowledge regarding resources available to the client, their families and to the staff to ensure optimal care when clients leave the hospital. Social workers also allow for the client to have their concerns and wishes heard by a non medical person."