

# **Title: “Emergency department patients with complex health and social needs: what do social workers do?”**

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## **Abstract**

High expectations for people to remain living in the community, together with limitations in resources available to support these people, have anecdotally impacted on the intersection of medical and social needs for some people presenting to Emergency Department.

**Background:** patients aged under 65 years presenting at hospital Emergency Departments with multiple complex health and social needs are at risk of extended length of stay and possible loss of function. Their situation challenges health and allied health staff, in particular social workers, to focus on arriving at strategies to ensure appropriate timely discharge.

**Methods:** a mixed method study analyzing 15 patient files, interviewing 8 social workers at two major Melbourne metropolitan hospitals was carried out to better understand patient characteristics and social workers’ decision making practices.

**Results:** data mining of patient files revealed key characteristics shared by such patients were able to be identified. Thematic analysis of social workers’ interviews illuminated the factors taken into account in their decision making, highlighting their assessment skills, resource and knowledge gaps. On the basis of these findings, a set of guidelines will be drafted to assist in early detection of potentially problematic Emergency Department patient presentations

**Discussion:** patients aged under 65 years with multiple and complex health and social needs presenting at hospital emergency departments are a relatively under-researched group. This project has focused on highlighting patient characteristics which signal a need for early intervention in order to reduce length of stay and improve patient well-being and health outcomes. While the focus has been on social workers’ decision making practice with this group, the findings are of relevance to other allied health workers. Further, the opportunity to establish guidelines for early identification and action regarding this patient group may be a valuable contribution to strengthening the response of team members across health services.