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BEYOND METHADONE: THE ROLE OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN SUSTAINING RECOVERY FROM DRUG ADDICTION IN TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of family social support on the recovery process of patients attending the MAT Clinic at Sekou-Toure Regional Referral Hospital in Mwanza. A qualitative cross-sectional design was employed, engaging 14 participants comprising 8 MAT clients, 6 family members, and 10 healthcare providers. Purposive sampling was used to select clients and health workers directly involved in treatment, while convenience sampling identified family members willing to participate. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically to explore perceptions, experiences, and practices related to family involvement in recovery. Findings revealed three key dimensions of family support: entrepreneurial motivation, family counselling, and trust. Families that involved patients in income-generating activities reduced idleness, built confidence, and fostered self-reliance. Counselling improved communication, empathy, and conflict resolution, while trust encouraged openness, adherence to treatment, and reduced stigma. Together, these forms of support created a stable and accountable environment that minimized relapse risks. The study concludes that family social support is central to sustaining recovery in MAT programs, complementing pharmacological treatment. Integrating structured family-led interventions, including entrepreneurial activities and counselling, is recommended to enhance long-term treatment outcomes.

Keywords: Family support, MAT, methadone, addiction recovery, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Drug and substance addiction is a complex global health challenge with far-reaching physiological, psychological, and social consequences. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021) estimates that over 36 million people worldwide suffer from drug use disorders, while the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014) emphasizes that relapse rates remain high even among individuals receiving evidence-based treatment. Although pharmacological interventions such as methadone are central in addressing opioid dependence, the recovery process extends beyond medication to include social, cultural, and familial dimensions that shape treatment adherence and long-term rehabilitation (McLellan et al., 2000; Orford et al., 2013).

In Tanzania, Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) services have been introduced to address the rising burden of drug addiction, with methadone being the primary intervention. At Sekou-Toure Regional Referral Hospital (RRH) in Mwanza Region, MAT has been operational since 2018 with

the aim of rehabilitating clients, preventing relapse, and minimizing further physiological and psychological harm. Clinical records from 2018 to 2025 reveal that a total of 831 clients were enrolled in the program, of whom 266 are currently continuing treatment, 62 died, 52 successfully graduated, while 451 (54.27%) relapsed during the treatment period (Sekou-Toure RRH MAT Records, 2025). This relapse rate raises critical questions about the effectiveness of MAT when applied in isolation from broader psychosocial support systems.

Previous studies in Tanzania and elsewhere have largely emphasized the pharmacological effectiveness of methadone (Mbatia et al., 2021; WHO, 2014), but have paid limited attention to the social and cultural contexts that underpin recovery. Yet, research indicates that family support plays a vital role in shaping treatment outcomes by encouraging adherence, reducing stigma, and fostering resilience against relapse (Orford et al., 2013; NIDA, 2018). The gap in understanding the influence of family involvement in MAT in Tanzania underscores the need for further investigation.

This study therefore seeks to examine the influence of family social support on the recovery process of drug and substance addiction in the MAT Clinic at Sekou-Toure RRH. The central argument is that while methadone is crucial in stabilizing individuals with opioid dependence, family involvement is equally significant in sustaining recovery. Situating this discussion within both local realities and global perspectives contributes to the broader debate on integrating pharmacological and social approaches in the treatment of drug addiction.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to capture in-depth insights into the influence of family social support on the recovery process of individuals undergoing Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) at Sekou-Toure Regional Referral Hospital. By grounding the research in a qualitative paradigm, the researcher was able to conduct in-depth interviews with selected patients, family members, and healthcare providers, which allowed for the exploration of detailed personal experiences, views, and challenges regarding family involvement in the recovery process (Larsen, 2023). A cross-sectional research design was employed, enabling the collection of data at a single point in time across different groups—patients, family members, and health workers—thereby providing a comprehensive "snapshot" of diverse perspectives within a specific timeframe (Capili, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Grujicic & Nikolic, 2021). The study population was drawn using both purposive and convenience sampling techniques, where purposive sampling was used to select MAT clients and healthcare providers directly involved in substance use recovery, while convenience sampling was applied to identify family members who were readily available and willing to participate (Campbell, Smith, & Johnson, 2020; Trochim, 2020; Golzar et al., 2022). In total, the study engaged 14 participants comprising 8 MAT clients and 6 family members, alongside 10 health workers including doctors, nurses, and a social welfare officer, ensuring a balance between treatment experiences and support perspectives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to share their subjective experiences in their own words, offering rich, detailed, and personal accounts of recovery and family support (Knott et al., 2022). Data analysis followed a thematic approach, beginning with the transcription of recorded interviews, followed by repeated readings to familiarize with the content, coding of responses line by line, and the identification of recurring patterns that were organized into overarching themes reflecting the role of family involvement in the recovery process (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This methodological approach provided a nuanced and holistic understanding of how family social support shapes recovery outcomes in MAT programs.

FINDINGS

Entrepreneurial Motivation

The study found that entrepreneurial motivation served as an important form of support for individuals undergoing recovery. Families actively engaged recovering members in income-generating activities, such as running kiosks, tailoring, or operating motorbike businesses. Participation in these activities reduced idleness, provided a sense of purpose, and fostered self-reliance, all of which helped minimize the risk of relapse. Additionally, involvement in productive work boosted the confidence and morale of recovering individuals, reinforcing their commitment to treatment and supporting long-term recovery outcomes.

Adult male victim from igoma streat with secondary education shared:

> When my brother helped me open a small kiosk, it kept me busy every day. Instead of sitting idle and thinking about drugs, I was thinking about how to attract customers and make profit. That sense of responsibility has really given me a new purpose (*DA. 001, September, 2025*). [Translated from Swahili words]

Similarly, Adult married father (family member) from Mkuyuni streat with primary education revealed:

> We realized that if our son stayed at home without work, he would easily go back to old habits. So, as a family, we contributed some money for him to start a small motorbike business. Now he feels proud because he earns something and supports himself (*FM 002, September, 2025*).[Translated from Kiswahili]

This indicates that entrepreneurial support from families provides recovering individuals with responsibility, financial stability, and renewed self-esteem, thereby minimizing the risk of relapse

4.3.2 Family Counselling

Family counselling emerged as a significant dimension of support for individuals undergoing Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT). Families who participated in counselling sessions alongside patients helped create an atmosphere of openness, empathy, and mutual understanding. These sessions enabled family members to better comprehend the challenges of recovery, learn strategies to provide effective support, and strengthen communication within the household. As a result, patients felt more supported and understood, which enhanced their adherence to treatment, reduced feelings of isolation, and contributed to a more positive recovery experience.

A 29-year-old divorced man with secondary education explained:

> Attending counselling sessions together with my parents has helped me a lot. We talk openly, they understand my struggles, and I also listen to their pain. It makes me feel like I am not alone in this journey (*DA. 002, September, 2025*). [Translated from Kiswahili]

Likewise, a 52-year-old married mother with primary education reported:

> Before counselling, I used to blame my son all the time, but now I have learned how to support him without anger. We sit together, talk honestly, and plan how to overcome difficulties. It has reduced many misunderstandings in our family (*FM. 001, September, 2025*) [Translated from Kiswahili].

This implies that family counselling enhances communication, promotes acceptance, and fosters resilience, which is crucial for sustainable recovery.

Family Trust

The study identified trust between recovering individuals and their families as a core aspect of successful recovery. When patients trusted that their families were supportive and non-judgmental, they were more willing to adhere to medication schedules, attend clinic appointments, and share challenges openly. This mutual trust fostered a sense of security and emotional stability, reducing anxiety and fear of stigma that could otherwise hinder recovery. However, trusting relationships encouraged patients to follow guidance from both family members and healthcare providers, enhancing engagement in treatment and decreasing the likelihood of relapse. Overall, family trust emerged as a vital psychosocial factor that strengthened commitment to the recovery process and improved treatment outcomes.

A 44-year-old married man with primary education disclosed:

> The hardest part was to see how my family had lost trust in me. But slowly, as I stayed away from drugs and followed treatment, they started believing in me again. That trust gives me strength not to disappoint them anymore (*DA. 003, September, 2025*) [Translated from Kiswahili]

A 40-year-old married mother with primary education also remarked:

> At first, we were afraid to even leave money in the house, but now things have changed. We see that he is serious about his recovery, and we are beginning to trust him again. That trust is like a reward, and it encourages him to remain disciplined (*FM. 002, September,2025*) [Translated from Kiswahili]

This indicates that trust operates as a psychological anchor that reinforces accountability and encourages recovering individuals to maintain positive behavior. Also, through interview conducted with family members the study obtained different response as one of the interviewed respondents said that,

> Whenever she feels weak or tempted to relapse, I sit with her, listen to her worries, and reassure her that we are in this together. Our conversations help her feel supported and give her the courage to keep attending the clinic and taking her medication (*FM. 003, September, 2025*) [Translated from Kiswahili]

DISCUSSION

Entrepreneurial Motivation

The study found that entrepreneurial motivation and family-supported income-generating activities played a significant role in recovery. Engaging patients in small businesses or vocational work reduced idleness, built confidence, and reinforced commitment to treatment while minimizing relapse risk. Families acted as mentors, providing both emotional and practical support, which enhanced self-esteem, responsibility, and social integration. These findings align with Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1966), which emphasizes family interdependence and empowerment in reducing anxiety and promoting autonomy. They also resonate with Beattie and Longabaugh's (2023) study, which linked family support with lower relapse and improved treatment adherence. The study suggests that MAT programs could strengthen recovery outcomes by integrating family-led entrepreneurial support and partnering with microfinance institutions or NGOs.

Family Counselling

Family counselling sessions were shown to improve communication, empathy, and mutual support between patients and families, creating a stable environment for recovery. They motivated patients

to adhere to treatment while helping families manage stress, resolve conflicts, and provide consistent support. This reflects Bowen's concept of differentiation of self, where families balance emotional connection with healthy boundaries. The findings also relate to Williams and Carter (2019), who found that financial and emotional support improved recovery, though families especially in low-income settings often experienced strain. Lack of financial support was associated with higher dropout rates, underscoring the need for structured family involvement in MA

Family Trust

Trust between patients and families was found to be a critical enabler of treatment adherence and recovery. Supportive and non-judgmental family relationships reduced stigma, encouraged openness, and strengthened commitment to treatment. Consistent with Bowen's Family Systems Theory, trust fostered both autonomy and emotional connection, reducing anxiety and enhancing cohesion. These findings align with Harwerth et al. (2023), who showed that practical support, such as covering transport costs, was strongly linked to treatment adherence. Thus, trust combined with practical assistance plays a key role in sustaining recovery outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that family social support particularly entrepreneurial motivation, counselling, and trust is central to the recovery of individuals in MAT clinics. Families that empower recovering members economically, emotionally, and socially foster stability, purpose, and accountability, thereby reducing relapse and enhancing treatment adherence. Bowen's Family Systems Theory reinforces that family involvement can either hinder or accelerate recovery, depending on its quality.

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