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LABOUR SOCIAL WORK GROUP

Mental Health Social Work Role

The transformative role of a social worker in general and specifically in mental health

As a rule, the earlier a family or individual can access social work support the more effective the outcome for any user of mental health services and resources. There is a predictive nature to the diagnosis of mental illness which requires a social worker to engage with the individual and their family at the earliest signs of emotional and psychological difficulties. The current emphasis on applying eligibility criteria across the professions in mental health inevitably results in crisis management and the later the support is provided in the course of emotional and psychological difficulties the greater the likelihood is that a person's mental health deteriorates to a point where a diagnosis can be attributed to that person's state of mind and "recovery" of the prior state of mind becomes less achievable.

The Social Services Department is often, and appropriately, the initial point of contact in the local community for families and individuals who might require services and resources and, therefore, the first point of assessment of need. Mental health does not occur in isolation but always within the family and community. The reasons for emotional and psychological difficulties are rooted in and emerge from the context of the family and community. The social worker's role at this initial stage of contact requires a comprehensive knowledge of the available services and resources, their referral criteria, and how they might fit in with an integrated system of support to people living in the local community. An understanding of mental health in its broadest sense is required at this first point of contact in order to ensure the most appropriate support is provided to meet the assessed needs of the family and/or individual seeking support. It is the wellbeing of family and/or individual that is being assessed from their perspective, employing empathic communications skills and taking diversity of culture, ethnicity, religion, disability, and sexual orientation into consideration.

The Approved Mental Health Practitioner role requires a particular knowledge of the law relating to mental health, incorporating mental capacity and both civil and human rights in relation to the individual and family in society. This specialist role also requires an understanding of the medical terminology, diagnostic criteria and process, and the particular services and resources such as the local psychiatric units in hospitals, secure units, or available alternative residential resources. This role has to be integrated with the local psychiatric service and General Practitioner service as well as the police and ambulance services as and when necessary, so that a system is in place to make an assessment and deliver the most appropriate service to an individual and their family, either on a planned or emergency basis. Empathic communication skills are required to conduct the assessment of the person's state of mind, an assessment which might also require gathering essential information and observations from others who have had recent contact with the person being assessed.

The mental health social work role ought to extend to the continuity of support for a person who has been assessed as having emotional and psychological difficulties, which could lead to a diagnosis of mental illness without such support, and to a person who has a diagnosis and is being supported in the community. This role requires integration with the local psychiatric service which will include designated clinical responsibility of a psychiatrist and medical support from the community psychiatric nurse, as part of an overall therapeutic and rehabilitative plan. The continuity and regularity of this support is crucial to the effectiveness of any plan, as does the consistency and familiarity of the social worker and CPN. The severity of the person's emotional and psychological difficulties, which have led to the diagnosis of a mental illness, directly correlates with the long-term nature of the planned therapeutic and rehabilitative support. Short-term support is more likely in these circumstances to lead to regular deterioration of the person's state of mind, and consequent readmissions to psychiatric hospital.

The knowledge required for effective mental health social work is rooted in an understanding of the social, emotional and psychological factors which contribute to a person's mental health, and which, therefore, when manifested in difficulties can lead to a diagnosis of mental illness. This knowledge does not depend on biological or neuroscientific knowledge of human nature which has an impact on the material body of a person. In all my experience of developing and managing mental health services, and assessing the needs of people, and providing the services to meet those needs, I have never encountered evidence of an inherited condition which could be diagnosed as a mental illness. I have, on the other hand, consistently uncovered negative and distressing factors within the individual's experience and in their family relationships which have contributed to the emotional and psychological difficulties experienced by the person with whom I, my social work team, community care officer team, mental health occupational therapist and other support workers, worked. The social worker is the one professional who has the role to elicit the factors which contribute to a person's emotional and psychological difficulties before the person is diagnosed with mental illness, and is also in a position to elicit this information following the diagnosis and psychiatric treatment through developing a professional relationship which is aimed at the restoration or rediscovery of confidence and self-esteem which underpin a person's mental health. This relationship can only be built over time and consistent contact, consciously building mutual trust through empathic communication skills.

A social worker is best placed among professionals to coordinate services and resources which meet the assessed needs of users. They can carry out wide-ranging assessments which require knowledge of all the potential services and resources available within the local community and beyond. This is a uniquely important role requiring a broad awareness of services and resources which match the needs of users. This role includes knowledge and understanding of how other professional and agencies, including statutory, voluntary and private, can be appropriately utilised to meet the typically complex needs of the families and individuals that social workers have to address.

Specifically in mental health the social worker needs to understand which professionals such as clinical psychologists, community psychiatric nurses, psychiatrists, counsellors and therapists, might be helpful in meeting the needs of the users. They also need to understand how other specialist services such as CAMHS and Rape Crisis and other agencies might be referred to appropriately. The social worker is also uniquely positioned to facilitate an integrated service because their assessment of the needs of families and individuals enables them to have an overview of the requisite services

and resources that might meet these needs. An integrated service or systematic support cannot occur spontaneously, however well-organised the various agencies might be. It depends for its effectiveness on a professional knowing how a system might be integrated and taking responsibility for its effectiveness, in order to bring the integration about. This is a fundamental and crucial role and is purposefully and appropriately unique to the role of a social worker.

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