



Social Work in Primary Care

Submission prepared by the Irish Association of Social Workers to the Primary Medical Care subcommittee of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children.

The Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) welcomes the development of primary care and the opportunity to contribute to the report on Primary Medical Care in the community. The IASW appreciates this opportunity to outline the role of social work, the contribution social workers make to this setting and the importance of the inclusion of social workers on all primary care teams.

What is Social Work?

Social work is a profession with a unique skills base, which has developed from the integration of sociological and psychological theory and practice and has its basis in the promotion of social justice. It aims to empower individuals, groups and communities to take charge of their lives within their own environment and social context.

The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) defines social work as follows:

“The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.” (IFSW 2000)

The Provision of Community Based Health Care Services

Community based health care services have been provided in different forms over the years. The 1970 Health Act established the Health Boards to administer the Health Services on a regional basis on behalf of the Department of Health. At the time, the American Management Consultants, McKinsey published a number of reports recommending new management structures for the delivery of Health Services through separate care programmes; one of these was the Community Care Programme. (McKinsey report, 1970, 1971) The Community Care Programme had the responsibility for services that were primarily non-institutional or community based.

The philosophy of the McKinsey report for the Community Care Programme was to establish a multi-disciplinary team for services that could work as a resource to families and individuals in a non-fragmented way and where “*local knowledge, insight and contact with the population were essential*”. (McKinsey 1970, p34)

Upon the establishment of the Health Boards, social workers were employed in community care areas and they provided a community social work service to all client groups. Their involvement was based on a preventative/ early intervention model of service delivery. This general brief gradually changed, partly due to an increased awareness of child neglect and abuse and the statutory responsibility of Health Board for the welfare of children. The social work service took on the Health Board’s statutory responsibility for children and they had to prioritise this aspect of the service to ensure that they were able to provide for the needs of the children and their families.

The Role of Social Work on Primary Care Teams

The IASW welcomes the return to a more general role for social workers through their involvement on primary care teams and considers that social worker make a very valuable contribution to primary care teams, due to their specific skills base and the values they share in relation to theories, practice skills and methods acquired through their professional training

Social work members of the IASW sign up for the IASW Code of Ethics and Practice when they join the Association. These are built on a set of values, which include: promoting dignity and respect, equality, highlighting poverty issues and promoting inclusion and addresses barriers, inequities and injustice. Social work practice involves crisis intervention and protection work, intervening with personal psychosocial problems, as well as family work, group work, social policy, planning and community development.

Social work skills include: problem solving, counselling/individual work, crisis intervention, group therapy, family therapy, community development as well as practical interventions like obtaining services and resources for clients,

The social work task in primary care teams include focusing on fostering advocacy and empowerment with clients, families and communities to address health inequities. Groups most at risk such as older people, vulnerable adults, people with learning, physical and sensory disabilities, travellers and ethnic minorities etc. have been identified by primary care social workers as those most likely to be referred to the service.

Identification and Prevention of Abuse

Social Workers as members of primary care teams will have a role in identifying and preventing abuse for vulnerable adults and may make initial child welfare assessments and provide crisis intervention in families where domestic abuse, including elder abuse, is suspected or detected. Child and Family Social Work Services continue to have the responsibility for referrals concerning Child Welfare.

It can be difficult for a number of client groups to access social work services in their area or in relation to their specific concern. Primary care social workers will be able to offer their services and skills to these groups enabling them to access services, to overcome personal issues through counselling and therapy and to help their families through crisis periods.

When family or care systems for adults with disabilities or older people are breaking down or where abuse or neglect is suspected, social workers have the skills to intervene to arrange for care, for legal intervention and or for the up-skilling of care-givers where that may be necessary.

Referral Criteria and Priorities

Referral criteria and priorities will need to be developed and may vary, depending on the need and demands of the area in which the primary care team is based. The criteria for a referral to a social worker on a primary care team could include:

- Abuse or neglect
- Deterioration in physical or mental condition
- Carer network collapsed or at risk of collapse
- People in need of supervision or attention
- Impairment of ability to carry out personal care of domestic routines
- Support required to sustain involvement in work, education or learning
- Family or other social roles and responsibilities cannot be sustained without help
- Health and Welfare benefits of referrals needed to other specialist agencies

Some additional types of need which could be addressed by social workers have already been identified in the joint work by the HSE, IMPACT and the HSEA and include:

Self harm
Aggression or challenging behaviour
Bereavement
Emotional problems, trauma
Depression
Living with abuse or neglect or at risk
Domestic violence
Environmental hazards to personal safety
Refusing essential health and or social services
Complex health needs
Substance misuse
Physical, sensory or learning disability
Adjustment issues
Parenting skill deficits
Dementia
Terminal illness
Communication problems

Carer with stress, or disability or health problems
Homelessness
Accommodation issues
Impairment of vital personal or domestic care routines
(*Workload Management Report*, H. Giller, 2006)

The role of social work in primary care consists of: assessment of bio-psychosocial aspects of health and well-being, concrete service provision, counselling and therapeutic services, consultation with other health care providers about the biopsychosocial factors and their implications for health and well being, education and training in biopsychosocial aspects of illness and intervention strategies and community development and capacity building. (*Preparing for Change: Social Work and Primary Health Care*, 2003, Canada)

Essential to best practice in primary health care is teamwork, which requires clear and concise communication and should include regular meetings, referral forms, clear concise case notes and care plans. Teams need to discuss and agree the care plans, share information on assessments and approaches and identify roles and designate tasks. Workers on the team may do joint home visits and plan joint work including group work and health promotion and education work.

Every primary care team should have at least one social worker on the team. Currently this varies from area to area, even where demographics indicate a large number of vulnerable people: elderly, ethnic groups, etc. Access to social work services should not be confined to any particular demographic group as social workers should provide a service to all ages in terms of maintaining their future health.

Some primary care social workers have expressed concerns about the patchwork way in which clinical supervision has been arranged, though this has often been a reflection of demographics as well as staffing demands in an area. The onset of the registration of social workers, and other professionals in primary care in the near future means that clinical supervision arrangements and regular training and up-dating of skills will be essential to obtaining and maintaining professional registration for social workers

It should be noted that a situation of inequity exists nationally as some primary care teams will only see clients who have a medical card for GP's who have signed up for the Primary Care concept. Other areas take a geographic view and see it as the right of people with health needs in their catchment or geographic area. In addition to this, due to the budgetary restraints, primary care social workers have difficulty accessing resources for their client groups. These cutbacks affect the most vulnerable client groups in every area.

Summary: Social Work and Primary Care

The focus of primary care social work is to support the delivery of health and personal social services at the local level. Social work's particular area of expertise relates to personal social services. Delivering such services involves supporting the service user to improve their own circumstances and health status. In this work, the values and related approaches that a primary care social worker would use include advocacy,

promotion of independence, an individualised care plan and the promotion of dignity, respect, client choice and self esteem.

The development of community based social work services in the Primary Health Care model is welcome as it promotes the ethos that the best way of delivering health care in the community is at the initial point of contact in the local community. This model of service delivery should support the early identification of problems and the early and prompt intervention in crisis situations and in complex family, social and health problems.

The Irish Association of Social Workers welcomes the introduction of primary care as a progressive and holistic way of looking after the health of the nation in the new century.

*“You must be the change you wish to see in the world”
Mohandas Ghandi*

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