

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN PRIMARY CARE

IN IRELAND:

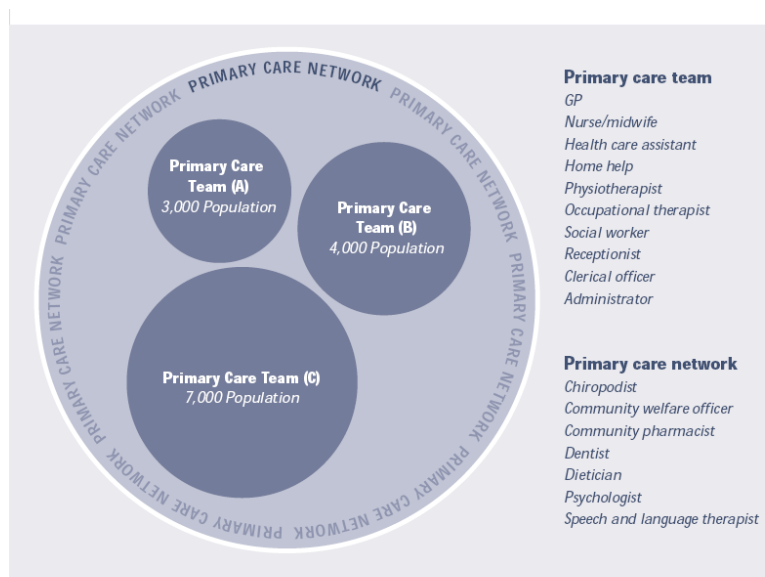
Social Workers and Primary Health Care;

Special Interest Group of the IASW

2011

Generic social workers are core members of the Primary Care Teams in the Irish Primary Care Strategy:

Figure 1: Primary care team and primary care network



From: Department of Health and Children (2001) Primary Care: A New Direction *Quality and Fairness - A Health System for You* Health Strategy p. 22

All members of Primary Care Teams "... require new roles and responsibilities to be defined which reflect the generalist nature and content of work within the primary care team and which place a significant emphasis on interdisciplinary working".

(Dept. of Health and Children, 2004, p. 51)

WHAT IS SOCIAL WORK?

“The social work profession promotes 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” (International Federation of Social Work, 2001).

The purpose of Social Work is problem-solving, empowerment and social change where people interact with their environments (Payne 2006, IFSW 2001).

WHAT IS PRIMARY HEALTH CARE?

The World Health Organisation Declaration on Primary Health Care (also known as “Health for All 2000”) developed the following social model definition of Primary Health Care:

“Primary Health Care is essential health care based on practical, scientifically sound and socially acceptable methods and technology made universally accessible to individuals and families in the community through their full participation and at a cost that the community and country can afford to maintain at every stage of their development in the spirit of self-reliance and self-determination. It forms an integral part both of the country’s health system, of which it is the central function and main focus, and of the overall social and economic development of the community.”

(WHO Alma Ata 1978)

The Primary Care Model is an interdisciplinary team based approach to service delivery which aims to “move care, where appropriate, from secondary to primary

level, from primary level to self care (by empowering people), and from self care to no care requirement (through illness prevention and health promotion)”

(Department of Health and Children 2001: ‘Primary Care: A New Direction, p. 21).

Primary Health Care seeks “health for all” through full participation of communities in pursuit of social justice and equality (WHO 1978, CSDH, 2008). The IFSW , in its own policy statement on health, very much favours these WHO principles, as they proposed Primary Health Care as the key tool to promote what we now call ‘Population Health’ by tackling what is now called the ‘social determinants of health’.([IFSW 2008](#))

“Primary care is an approach to care that includes a range of services to keep people well..... The services provide first-level contact that is fully accessible by self-referral and have a strong emphasis on working with communities and individuals to improve their health and social well-being.” (Presentation by Brian Murphy, National Primary Care Services Manager, 2009 The Role of Primary Care within Ireland’s Future Health Service).

HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE IN IRELAND:

The mission of the Health Service Executive (HSE) is ‘to enable people live healthier and more fulfilled lives” (HSE, 2008 – Corporate Plan 2008 – 2011. Health Service Executive, Dublin.)

The HSE’s Health Inequalities Framework 2010-2012 recognises that ‘the health of individuals, groups and communities is affected not only by the level of health and social-care services provision, but equally by the degree of access to them’ (p.4).

To this end, the Health Service Executive (HSE) has adopted a Population Health vision and approach (HSE, 2007 and HSE, 2008)

“A Population Health approach is one which promotes and protects the health of the whole population or sub-groups, with particular emphasis on reducing health inequalities.” (The HSE 2008: Population Health Strategy).

Population Health will be achieved by increasing the “emphasis on primary care and health promotion” and “improving user participation and empowerment.” (HSE Model of Care). The Irish Health Service Executive’s recognition of primary care teams as having a key role in promoting health and addressing health inequalities is highlighted in the HSE Health Inequalities Framework 2010 – 2012. The document further emphasises capacity building for health and to address health inequalities as key to reducing the gap in health outcomes between subgroups of any population.

“Social Work promotes and advocates the rights-based social model of health and Population Health, and the right to ‘Health for All’, is a requirement of social justice.” (IFSW 2008).

THE SOCIAL WORK GENERALIST ROLE ON THE PCT:

“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” (IASW, 2008: 4/5).

All disciplines on Primary Care Teams work with the whole person, from cradle to grave in the community context, in a way that is generic needs focussed, tackling all the determinants of health, including the social determinants, in equal participative partnership (World Health Organization: World Health Report 2008: *Primary Health Care Now More Than Ever* p.43). Social Workers in Primary Care are agents of social change, offering a service to individuals, families, groups and communities that is:

1. Voluntary
2. Cradle to Grave can we use the term cradle to grave?
3. Generic
4. Open access (anyone, including a service user can refer to the Social Worker on the Primary Care Team):

Some of the functions of the Primary Care Social Worker include:

- Holistic Needs Assessment
- Consultation with other health and social care providers
- Education and training in Health and Social Care
- Community development and capacity building
- Concrete service provision
- Support Counselling and therapeutic services

*(Adapted from: **Fildes & Cooper 2003** Preparing for Change: Social Work and Primary Health Care, CASW, Canada).*

“Social work is a diverse profession working in many of the health and social sectors included in a primary health care approach. Across all of these sectors, social work has always maintained a strong “person in environment” approach to working with individuals, families, groups and communities. By working within the framework of the determinants of health, social workers make the necessary links between the physical, social, emotional and economic impacts of health” (CASW 2007).

Social Workers on Primary Care Teams aim to tackle health inequalities, promote self determination, build capacity and work with people to deal with issues that may be causing them distress and/or limiting their well being. Our social focus is our added value and added difference.

The Social Worker works with any person, family or group to make changes they want by finding solutions to any difficulties or needs that they identify: An individual may wish to discuss anything that concerns her/him, or their relationships, or people may be seeking social supports from community self-help groups or from agencies.

The Social Worker also works in partnership with community groups to develop cooperative action for their greater control of any service that affects the community’s

health and well-being. This includes advocacy and social action to address health and social inequalities and other barriers to fairness, access and quality of care:

“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” (IASW Submission 2008: 3). The Primary Care social work service will act to empower users to access the services and resources they require and in keeping with the ethos of user participation, self help and motivation, aim to foster the service user’s own ability to recover and maintain a good quality of life. The Primary Care Social Worker working as part of a multi-disciplinary team aims to promote health and well-being, focuses on fostering advocacy and empowerment and seeks to encourage self-help in the local community (IASW, 2008).

CURRENT ACTIVITES OF SOCIAL WORKERS ON
PRIMARY CARE TEAMS:

Social Workers are involved in the process of community needs assessments and promoting community participation: The role of the primary care social worker is influenced by the needs of each primary care area to which the social worker is attached. A key element of social work in primary care is that of community development and the promotion of community participation, especially where there is social exclusion. “Community participation in primary care will be strengthened by encouraging and facilitating the involvement of local community and voluntary groups in the planning and delivery of primary care services.” (DoHC 2001, p. 39). Communities now have the opportunity to discuss their own health and social care needs and become an intrinsic part in the delivery of services to meet these needs.

Social Workers are involved in launching /facilitating health promotion group-work initiatives e.g. anxiety management, self-esteem/self-confidence support groups, healthy eating groups etc. PCSW’s have been identified as an intrinsic aspect of the community participation process and as such some PCSW’s are actively involved in setting up participative community health forums in their local PCT areas (Dr. Jane Pillinger). Social Workers have also been promoting and facilitating local health

fairs, public library based healthy reading resources, new rural meals-on-wheels services, as well as networking links between PCTs and local area partnerships, local authorities etc..

Primary care social work is facilitating ease of access to generalist social work services as a preventative measure, aiming to avoid deterioration of people's life circumstances and facilitating early interventions of required services and agencies. The social worker acts as a resource to other MDT members and to service users through established networks with local services, statutory and voluntary, appropriate to the needs of the service user.

Social Workers on PCTs currently receive and accept referrals concerning people in all age groups and in all Care Groups (and in none) including:

- Individuals/families affected by economic hardship and/or discrimination
- People experiencing challenging / stressful life circumstances
- Persons who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless (if unable to access specialist agency supports)
- People finding it hard to cope with loss
- Persons affected by domestic violence (if there is no local specialist agency)
- Carer-givers in need of support or advocacy
- Older persons in difficulty
- Minority ethnic groups
- Persons with disabilities
- Couples and families in conflict
- Vulnerable families and children (for instance due to deprivation)
- Young families and those parenting alone in need of supports
- Parents in stress
- People who abuse substances (including alcohol) who are not linked into existing services
- People with life limiting or long-term illness
- Situations of self neglect
- Advocacy, Information and support regarding entitlements and services

(The above list is not exhaustive. The Social Work Service is open to any person whose health and social well-being is affected by social factors.).

If people have complex needs the Social Workers in Primary Care will facilitate access to the supports needed, (e.g. persons who are suicidal, children at risk, older persons who are abused) and direct referrals will be made to specialist services.

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