THE HISTORY OF THE ROLE OF
THE PRIMARY CARE SOCIAL
WORKER IN IRELAND

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1. Introduction

Generic social workers are core members of the Primary Care Teams in the Irish Primary Care Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2001).

The Department of Health and Children (DoHC) continue by stating in a later primary care development guidance document that 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” (DoHC, 2004: 51). This document aims to address this.
2. 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).

3. 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.” (World Health Organisation Alma Ata, 1978)

Primary Health Care seeks “health for all” through full participation of communities in pursuit of social justice and equality (WHO, 1978, CSDH, 2008). The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) in its own policy statement on health, very much favours these World Health Organisation (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).
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)” (DoHC, 2001: 21).

“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.” (Murphy, 2009).

4. Health and Social Care in Ireland
According to the Corporate Plan 2008-2011 the mission of the Health Service Executive (HSE) is ‘to enable people live healthier and more fulfilled lives” (HSE, 2008).

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’ (HSE, 2008: 4).

To this end, the 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.” (HSE, 2008).

Population Health will be achieved by increasing the “emphasis on primary care and health promotion” and “improving user participation and empowerment.” (HSE, 2009). 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).

5. **The Social Work Generalist Role on the Primary Care Team**

“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 (WHO: 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
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 and Cooper, 2003).
“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, 2008: 3). Social Workers on Primary Care Teams 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 an inter-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).
6. Current Activities 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: 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. Primary Care Social Workers (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 Primary Care Team (PCT) areas (Pillinger, 2010). 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 creating network links between PCT’s and local area partnerships, local authorities etc.

Social Workers in Primary Care offer 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 by required services and agencies. The social worker acts as a resource to other members of the inter-disciplinary team and to service users through established networks with local services, statutory and voluntary, appropriate to the needs of the service user.

Social Workers on PCT’s 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)
➢ Care-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.

7. **Summary**

Primary care is designed to be the first point of contact for a community’s population with the health and personal social services (Murphy, 2009). The range of interdisciplinary services provided at primary care level is fully accessible by self-referral. The World Health Organisation highlighted 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).
The role of the primary care social worker is influenced by the needs of the population in each primary care area to which the social worker is attached. For this reason, the role of the primary care social worker can vary across populations. Social Workers in primary care employ a range of interventions to meet the needs of their population varying from one to one/family casework and group work to community development work, health promotion activities and empowering community participation.

Social workers in primary care make the necessary links between the physical, emotional, social and economic impacts on the health of an individual and that of his/her community (CASW, 2007).
8. References

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