

Social Work In A Psychiatric Setting

Psychiatric Social Work may be defined as social work practised in mental hospitals, clinics or under other psychiatric auspices, the essential purpose of which is to serve people with mental or emotional disturbances.

Social services to patients suffering from mental illness were developed in the early 1900's. Social workers were introduced to State Mental Hospitals to assist the physicians by supplying information on the patient's home environment and his social problems. They remained unaffiliated from other social workers in name and training until 1913 when the Boston Psychiatric Hospital developed in the early 1900's. Sociatric social workers. World War I gave a sudden spurt to the already growing demand for social workers trained to work with individuals with nervous or emotional disorders, with the result that in 1918 programs of training were begun at Schools of Social work in Boston and New York to meet the need for specially trained psychiatric social workers.

During the past twenty years there has been an increase not only in the number of psychiatric social workers employed, but also in the functions they perform. Applying techniques acquired through post-graduate training in Social Service Work they may perform a wide and varied number of Social Service duties in mental hospitals and clinics.

In the mental hospital, the Social Worker is concerned with the investigation of the background and social situation of the patient, because in order to properly understand and treat psychiatric illness it is necessary to have as complete a knowledge as possible of the personality involved and the environment in which he lives. The Social Worker must also attempt to eliminate fear, prejudice, and other attitudes on the part of either relatives or patient which are obstacles to acceptance of psychiatric care and continuation of treatments. Another major concern of the Social Worker is helping patients with discharge plans, and follow-up care after the patient's discharge. The acid test of psychiatric treatment is the social rehabilitation of the patient. Therefore, the adjustment of the patient following his return to the community is of prime importance. The process of readjustment in the psychiatric patient is double difficult because of the negative attitude in the community towards mental illness. The Social Worker should be available to visit and counsel the patient in some of the problems that inevitably arise as the patient struggles to reestablish himself in the community. This kind of help can go a long way towards reducing the rate of readmissions which now occur.

In the psychiatric clinic the efforts of the Social Worker are concentrated mainly with the relatives of the patients. Frequently the success of psychiatric treatment in the clinic may hinge on whether or not appropriate changes can be effected in those close relatives who constitute the immediate environment for the patient.

This is quite apparent in the cases of disturbed children who may be referred to clinic for any number of reasons. Generally, the parent-child relationship plays an important role either in the cause or the continuance of the illness. While the psychiatrist works with the child, the Social Worker works with the parent. The goal is to achieve movement on the part of both parent and child so that there may be interrelated changes in the relationship they have with each other. There are some cases, however, in which the Social Worker may work directly with the patient. For instance, any number of problems lying clearly in the Social sphere may arise during the patient's treatment. These may be problems of employment, finances, etc., which are interfering with the progress of treatment. The Social Worker tries to help find solutions to these problems through appropriate use of community resources.

These are some of the more important ways in which the Social Worker may be used in the Psychiatric setting. In August, 1951, the Provincial Department of Health and Welfare employed one full time Psychiatric Social Worker, Miss Ethel Trainor, M. S. W., whose services are available to Falconwood Hospital and the new Mental Health Clinic in Charlottetown. At the present time, her work consists mainly in obtaining pertinent information for understanding of the patient and his family situation, as well as helping patients with plans for discharge. As the service develops it is hoped that more time and attention can be devoted to follow-up care for discharged patients, as this is an area in which the social worker has a unique contribution to make to the total treatment program.

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