

Meeting the Continuing Education Needs of Nursing Home Social Workers: A Professional Development Seminar

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Social workers play a vital role in enhancing the quality of life for nursing home residents (Institute on Medicine, 1986). Since the implementation of OBRA regulations in October 1990, an increasing number of social workers are providing services in nursing homes. Many of these professionals do not have training for work in nursing homes nor education in aging (Greene, Vourlekis, Gelfand, & Lewis, 1992; Peterson, 1990), and even fewer have a working knowledge of the social worker's functions in the nursing home setting (Gleason-Wynn, 1995). Quam and Whitford (1992) concluded that many nursing home social workers felt unprepared for their current positions. Murray (1996) found in her study of social workers in Texas nursing homes that 40% of the respondents had taken a course in gerontology, and only 20% had completed an internship in the aging arena. Lubben, Damron-Rodriguez, and Beck (1992) found there was a decline in gerontology curricula in schools of social work, despite an increase in student interest in aging.

This reported lack of preparation strongly suggests that continuing education programs have an opportunity to address the educational needs and professional development of nursing home social workers. In the new National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (1996), Standard 4.01(b) indicates that social workers should strive to become and remain proficient in professional practice. This means keeping current with new knowledge, such as participating in continuing education programs relevant to their area of practice. It is ethically sound for the social worker to have adequate basic professional knowledge and skills. As indicated by Reamer (1998), when social workers who work with older adults lack basic education regarding the aging process and intervention models relevant to older adults, they could be considered incompetent in their work. Continuing education is a means to stay abreast of new knowl-

edge and skills (Davenport & Wodarski, 1989), and address the concern regarding incompetent practice.

While exploring the continuing education needs of social workers serving the elderly, Greene (1990) grouped the topics into categories based on the traditional teaching areas of social work education: methods/practice, i.e., communication and interviewing skills and intervention strategies; human behavior, i.e., biosocial and psychosocial processes; policy and service issues, i.e., entitlement programs and programs for the aging; research, i.e., program evaluation; practitioner issues, i.e., ethics, values and job-related stress, and minority issues including cultural awareness. She found that there was a consensus about the content areas desired by practitioners. Respondents indicated a demand for content related to specialized intervention methods suited for older adults, clinical skills, and policy formation and advocacy skills.

Quam and Whitford (1992) found social workers want more information on working with behavioral problems of the elderly, understanding medical language and prescriptions, and working with families. Research completed by Gleason-Wynn (1995) and Murray (1996) concludes that respondents in both studies indicated a need for more training in completing documentation, particularly psychosocial assessments in working with residents who have mental and physical illness, especially depression and dementia, in group work with the residents, and with legal issues such as physician directives.

In this article is presented a suggested curriculum for a professional development seminar designed to provide professional social workers with practical knowledge to enhance the quality of their services to older adults. The two-day program (although it can be modified for a one-day presentation) provides a comprehensive overview of social work services in the nursing home setting.

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Participants are presented with theoretical and practical knowledge that is designed to enhance their services as a nursing home social workers. The targeted group for seminar attendees are social workers already working in nursing homes, as well as social workers interested in pursuing a nursing home career. The seminar traditionally has been offered through continuing education programs at universities and colleges, and through professional development departments in schools of social work.

Course Curriculum

The two-day continuing education program, entitled, *The Basics of Social Work in the Nursing Home Setting*, provides a comprehensive overview of social work services in the nursing home setting. The professionals obtain practical knowledge to assist them in providing quality services. The course focuses on topics related to social work interventions and methods, understanding human behavior, policy and service issues, and practitioner concerns. The curriculum is directed toward increasing the professional's understanding of the aging process and the special needs of the elderly in institutional settings.

The specific topics chosen for the curriculum are based upon research of the literature, on the author's nursing home experiences, and observations of the educational needs of nursing home social workers. Class lectures are supplemented by the selected text, *Social Work Practice in the Nursing Home Setting* (Gleason-Wynn & Fonville, 1996), and handouts that the students would find helpful in performing their job upon return to the nursing facility. The course agenda addresses the following:

- Policy
- Overview of the Nursing Home Setting
- Systems Approach in the Nursing Home Setting
- Federal, State, and Professional (NASW) Standards
- Methods

- Roles and Functions of the Social Worker
- Autonomy and Residents' Rights
- Group Work as an Intervention
- Family Intervention/Working with Families
- Staff Education and Teamwork
- Documentation
- Human Behavior
- Dealing with Behavior Problems
- Mental Status/Cognitive Impairment/Depression
- Psychotropic Medications
- Practitioner's Issues/ Program Evaluation
- Making Your Program Work

Other topics, such as sexuality and the nursing home resident, death and dying, advance directives, suicide and the elderly, ethical issues, and discharge planning are mentioned briefly to the students, but time does not permit adequate presentation and discussion.

Content Related to Policy

The purpose of this unit is to provide the student with an overview of the nursing home system, demographics of the resident population, probable medical and psychosocial needs of the residents, facility policies, and departmental composition including a historical context regarding the provision of social work services to nursing home residents. Important issues for review and discussion include Federal Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) (HCFA, 1992) and State licensure standards regulating social work practice in the nursing home. Professional standards as defined by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 1981) are also presented. All of these standards provide a set of performance expectations for the social workers for implementation in their facilities.

Content Related to Methods

The purpose of this unit is to provide the student with information concerning pertinent social work practice methods in the nursing home. A proposed job description of a nursing home social worker, along with the roles performed, is presented and discussed. Other topics include documentation, group work methods and suggestions for group content, family interventions, staff education or in-service training on psychosocial issues related to the residents, and implementation and advocacy of resident rights.

Documentation includes a review of content for social histories, psychosocial assessments, regular periodic reassessments, progress notes, and individualized care plans. For an in-class activity, the participants are asked to apply the lecture content by developing a care plan for a client in a case study. The case study is complete with a social history and psychosocial assessment.

Content on group work covers how to develop a group in a nursing home, potential barriers to overcome, and suggested group topics or formats, e.g., reminiscence, adjustment to life in a nursing home, and remotivation. Family interventions focus on family orientation/support groups, family councils, and methods for referring families to community support services, e.g., Alzheimer's groups, Children of Aging Parents, or other local mental health support groups. Content on staff education includes suggested methods of presentation, and topics related to psychosocial issues, e.g., residents' rights, autonomy, psychosocial losses, and dignity and respect. Participants are given outlines for suggested in-services, and are encouraged to work with the In-service Coordinator in their facility.

Understanding and advocating for resident rights is an important role for nursing home social workers. Participants receive a copy of the Resident Bill of Rights. Numerous items are selected by the instructor for discussion of implementation and advocacy as well as potential dilemmas to be encountered.

Content Related to Human Behavior

The purpose of this unit is to provide the student with information related to human behavior particularly mental health issues such as depression and dementia, dealing with problem behaviors, and the use of psychotropic medications. The lecturer explores biological reasons for mental status change in older adults. Students learn how to administer a mental state exam and a geriatric depression screen. Specific behavior problems related to mental impairment, e.g., wandering, non-compliance with daily care tasks, and disorientation, are discussed. Students are encouraged to share particular concerns from their facilities and to brainstorm with others on ways to alleviate the problem.

Students receive a handout summarizing psychotropic medications, including the purpose of use and possible side effects. It is explained that although social workers do not prescribe anti-psychotic, anti-depressant, and anti-anxiety medications, it is critical that social workers know what the medications are, and the impact of such medications on a resident's behavior. Social workers should be able to advocate knowledgeably on behalf of residents to prevent the overuse and misuse of such medications.

Cultural diversity is also an important component of human behavior. Content related to cultural awareness and ethnic content is integrated throughout the curricula of the seminar.

Content Related to Practitioner's Issues

The purpose of this unit is to examine how to make their programs work and get the job done. In this unit, topics related to practitioner concerns, such as time management and teamwork with nursing and other staff, are explored. The instructor provides time management principles, and participants are asked to examine their daily social work practice and apply some of the principles presented. Students are encouraged to share concerns about their practice and brainstorm ways to alleviate the problem.

As time allows, ethical issues and dilemmas can be presented and examined. This is an area that impacts social workers particularly as they actively advocate for the residents and the implementation of the residents' rights.

Students are presented with an extensive bibliography related to social work practice with older adults and social work practice in the nursing home setting. They are encouraged to begin a resource library in their facility.

Evaluation of the Course Content

This course has been offered numerous times over the past five years. Each time, participants are asked for feedback on the course content and whether or not it met their expectations. Time and time again the responses are most favorable, with the participants asking for more courses to be offered.

For the purpose of this article, an informal survey of two classes each with 14 students (n=28) was conducted. In addition to gathering demographic information about students attending the continuing education course, students were asked if the curriculum addressed the needs of the professional providing social work services in the nursing home setting. Prior to the start of class, all students were requested to complete a questionnaire about their educational background, years of experience, job functions and previous training, and course expectations — "What do you wish to learn or gain from attendance at this course?" At the completion of the class students evaluated the course content. Students were asked, "Were your expectations/goals for the course met?" and "What would you like to see more of in this course?"

The typical class participant had a bachelor's degree in social work, worked full-time in the nursing home, and had 0 to 3 years of experience. Six of the 28 students had no nursing home experience nor were they working in a nursing home. They were taking the course to gather information about the nursing home social worker's position. Only nine of the respondents had attended any previous

training programs related to aging issues, such as interdisciplinary care planning, psychotropic medications, advance directives, and psychosocial aspects of aging.

The attendees primarily wanted to learn how to be more efficient and effective in their job, how to complete required documentation, and to gain knowledge about the Federal and State standards. All of the participants responded favorably to the course curriculum. The majority (89%) felt that their expectations for the course were met. The remaining three respondents felt they needed more information on how to perform their job, especially as it related to the documentation requirements.

Discussion

The professional development course described in this article seeks to address the need for continuing education for social workers practicing in nursing homes. It is satisfying to the author that the majority of the participants feel their expectations for the course are met and that the topics presented are pertinent and helpful. The findings of the informal survey are consistent with those presented by Greene et al. (1992). Social workers in nursing homes want more knowledge about the issues related to intervention methods, human behavior, and policy. As indicated in the informal survey, the social workers want more education on skills development in the hands-on tasks of documentation and job functions. The social workers want a thorough understanding of the fundamentals of the job, thus enabling them to address the medically-related psychosocial needs of the residents. This raises a question: How and where do nursing home social workers receive this training? This course is at the forefront of meeting the need.

There are a few areas to be considered when deciding to replicate this or a similar course. The first area is the notification of targeted audience. Notification of the seminar has to reach nursing home social workers. Often, the social worker and nursing home are not on the existing mailing list of the continuing education department. The staff

should be provided a mailing list of nursing homes in the community. Individual letters and flyers can be sent to the attention of the nursing home social worker. Other contacts can include posting notices in local NASW newsletters, and with local long-term care social work groups. This is one area that needs to be enhanced to ensure that the social workers needing the information have access to the seminar.

Second, time needs to be allotted for the participants to share their concerns and frustrations, and to elicit support and ideas from one another and the instructor. The time frame selected for covering content should allow opportunities for discussion of newly found knowledge instead of cramming as much content as possible into the seminar. There should be a cap for the number of participants, such as 20-25 students. Third, the course needs to be taught by a practitioner who has knowledge and understanding of the nursing home social worker's job. The sessions offered need to be practical, skills-oriented, and highly specific to the concern at hand—in this case, work with older adults in nursing homes.

Finally, an area that the author plans to explore further is the evaluation component. Currently, the evaluation is one of subjective satisfaction and self-evaluation. Other methods of formal evaluation that would assess effectiveness of the seminar content need to be examined. One method could include a pre-test and post-test component examining cognitive knowledge gained. Another might be a criterion-referenced evaluation to determine if specific needs or goals were met, such as improved levels of understanding of job functions, utilization of specific skills, increased or improved ability to handle work-related problems, and an increase in job satisfaction and competence.

Conclusion

Where do social workers receive education and training about nursing homes and nursing home residents prior to working as a social worker in the nursing home setting? This is one of several challenges facing the social worker who chooses to provide social work services in the nursing home. If the social worker has not received this knowledge from formal education, then the answer to this question lies in the continuing education arena. Professional development programs can play a key role in addressing the ongoing educational needs of the nursing home social worker.

Finding quality continuing education programs that offer information and skill development pertinent to social work and aging is another challenge for the social worker. Social workers have often voiced to the author their frustration about the lack of appropriate programs and seminars about aging and nursing homes. The two-day continuing education program described in this article is an effort to address the scarcity of programs available to meet the demands.

However, this is only the beginning. More programs addressing the educational needs of nursing home social workers must be developed and offered. Other seminars relevant for professional development include bio-psycho-social aspects of older adults, legal aspects including advanced directives, ethical issues in the care of older adults, documentation for nursing home social workers, and mental health and older adults. As nursing home social workers gain more knowledge about the job, the quality of their work and services to the nursing home residents will be greatly enhanced.

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