

Social work and mental health: A reflection

This issue focuses exclusively on the topic of mental health which I particularly welcome as one of the new Co-Editors who, with Nigel Malin, will be taking over later this year. As someone who has been committed to the education and development of mental health practitioners for over 20 years, and as the Programme Director for one of the first training programmes in psychosocial interventions and recovery from 1997-2005 I couldn't have commissioned a more illuminating set of papers that reflect a sustained level of innovation in thinking about and delivering mental health practice. I would therefore like to begin by thanking Jerome Carson in his role as Guest Editor for compiling such an excellent edition.

Collectively the papers in this edition span qualitative and quantitative approaches and provide some key messages about how to promote service user recovery and empowerment. Authors demonstrate the contribution of:

- Assistive technologies to promote mental health;
- A new meaning of recovery that takes as its reference point inclusivity, and a strengths approach to promoting involvement/rebalancing of power;
- Social inclusion as synonymous with opportunities for employment, the promotion of hope and quality of life.

In addition to the above actual examples of service user involvement at Trust level are provided together with a strategic policy initiative to support wellbeing through interagency working in one London borough.

Practice issues such as the impact of the loss of one's Consultant psychiatrist on service users' mental health and the importance of clinical supervision for supporting staff and improving outcomes are highlighted and testify to the New Ways of Working agenda (DH, 2005).

One of the key issues this edition raises for me professionally, as an individual with a background as an Approved Mental Health Social Worker is that most of the papers are contributions from authors whose disciplinary background differs from my own. This accords with the New Ways of Working initiative that regards all disciplines as having essential shared capabilities when it comes to working with people with mental distress. In line with contemporary service development the importance of interdisciplinary working is also echoed through all the papers.

However a look at the social work values which underpin my profession (TOPSS, 2002) reaffirms my belief that the kind of approaches being presented in this edition fit with the scope of what seems to me to be fundamental to social work practice. In particular social workers' ability to:

- Identify and question their own values and prejudices, and the implications for practice;
- Respect and value uniqueness and diversity, and recognise and build on strengths;
- Promote people's rights to choice, privacy, confidentiality and protection;
- Assist people to increase control of and improve the quality of their lives;
- Identify, analyse and take action to counter discrimination and disadvantage;
- Practise in a manner that does not stigmatise or disadvantage either individuals, groups or communities.

My concern is that in the light of the social work reform agenda which has focused almost exclusively on social work with children and families the essential social work contribution to mental health practice is being lost. I also fear that we are losing experienced mental health social workers with the opportunities and expertise to reflect and write critically about their contribution.

We know that in adult services generally experienced social workers are being replaced by support staff who do not have a professional qualification. We also know that in mental health the social work contribution is being eroded through the introduction of the Approved Mental Health Professional (Mental Health Act 2007), the dominance of health commissioning and an apathy on the part of local authorities to challenge the power imbalance with health (Bailey and Liyanage in press).

For these reasons I hope that this edition will do two things. First that it will reinforce for social workers the importance of an approach which is rooted in anti-oppressive practice and that puts the service user at the centre of their care. Second that it will reawaken the social work contribution to innovative mental health practice and encourage practitioners and academics to reflect on mental health social work interventions and the need for publishing these in academic journals.

As the Co-Editor of a journal dedicated to social work and social sciences, I would like to reaffirm to social workers everywhere that our discipline needs to speak loudly and more clearly for itself as the profession with a statutory remit for care, protection and anti-oppressive practice. If we do not actively provide evidence of our contribution we will become consigned to the status of passive participant in interdisciplinary care delivery, a status which mental service users have fought so hard to overcome. Significantly from such a position we will struggle to do justice to those service users that we seek to empower.

Di Bailey
January 2012

References

- Bailey, D. and Liyanage, L. (in press) *The Role of the Mental Health Social Worker: Political pawns in the reconfiguration of adult health and social care*
- Department of Health (2005) *New Ways of Working for Psychiatrists: Engaging effective person-centred services through new ways of working in multidisciplinary and multi-agency contexts*. London, DH
- TOPSS (2002) *The National Occupational Standards for Social Work*.
http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/developing_skills/National_Occupational_Standards/social_work_NOS.aspx