Abstract

Title: The Hospital Social Worker then and now - in a historical perspective

Key words: Hospital social worker, professional tasks, mental pictures, professional territory conflicts, power (influence), professional esteem, social position.

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This study is an attempt to describe the development of social work in Health Care Organizations and to spread information on how it has been performed, particularly during the 1980s, and thereby contribute to increase the knowledge on the hospital social workers' professional situation and their professional tasks in Health Care Organizations of today. In the study light is shed on the purposes of hospital social work, the social workers' education and qualifications, their professional tasks and position (status) in Health Care Organizations and the interaction between the hospital social workers and other occupational groups. The study has a historical and, to a certain extent, an interprofessional perspective. It is based on a historical material and includes also data from an empirical study (survey), realised during the 1980s.

The following concepts are used to analyse the hospital social workers' professional situation: professional tasks, mental pictures and social position. The search for information on the historical evolution of hospital social work begins with an international view on the USA, Great Britain and Germany. Then, the origins of social work is analysed along with its continued evolution within psychiatric and somatic care in Sweden during the period 1900 - 1989.

The results of the study show that hospital social work started off in a similar way in Western Europe and in the USA. Changes in society and Health Care Organizations had created a need for a socially competent person who was tied to the Health Care Organizations to assist the patients. Doctors played an active part in initiating and launching the hospital social worker. Representatives from the scientific philanthropy and the feminist movement also played an active part in this.

It appears from the result of the study that the professional tasks in hospital social work have changed over the years. From emphasizing on actual assistance and support, having to construct the foundations of the profession and raise the funds, the modern social worker has more and more come to work as a social investigator, an intermediary and co-ordinator of public resources and, to a much larger extent, a therapist. Some professional tasks have disappeared, others have been transferred to other occupational groups and simultaneously new tasks have been added.

The hospital social workers' mental pictures (their ideas and mental framework concerning their professional tasks, methods and fields of competence) range somewhere in between the nurses' and the psychologists' mental pictures. In the beginning it was very important to the hospital social workers to fix the professional boundaries with the nurses. Over the years the social workers' mental pictures have been displaced towards more therapeutic activities,
specially during the 1980s. The issue of drawing-up boundaries between the fields of work of hospital social workers and psychologists have also been of current interest. The rapid evolution of the science of care attracted attention to the professional boundaries between hospital social workers and nurses.

The study also shows that the hospital social workers' social position has weakened. One strongly contributory cause to this is their lack of a professional license.