

BOOK REVIEW

Social work practice in nursing homes: creativity, leadership, and program

development, by Julie Sahlins. Chicago, Lyceum Books Inc, 2010, 176 pps, ISBN 978-1-933478-73-9.

The author has a varied and perhaps unusual educational background in painting, art education, and social work. This is reflected in the practice wisdom she shares as a nursing home social worker and her creative blend of programmes. Though the author's social work practice is clearly based in the United States, some aspects of nursing home care are not unfamiliar to those working in similar homes in mainland China, Hong Kong, and many parts of the world. The various social work practices described in this book could be selectively piloted, adapted, and evaluated for effectiveness in local contexts.

In the introduction, the author describes the general setting of nursing homes in the United States, whose main concern is for the bottom-line and which seek reimbursement of Medicare and Medicaid payments for services provided to patients. Some aspects of the work responsibilities of social workers in American nursing homes may be similar to those of other countries, such as care planning, Minimum Data Set documentation, managing crises, discharging of patients, working with a multi-disciplinary team, and so on. The information on worker-to-client ratio of 1:80 offers insights into the expected work load in American nursing homes, which could be even higher in less advanced or hard-pressed economies. The differences in workload would have practical implications for choice of programmes and programme development.

Chapter 1 provides background information on the history of nursing homes in America and discusses the possibility of being co-opted into a profit-oriented ethos as the institutionalized facilities are mostly private-run and part of a larger corporate chain. The

author's goal in creating and maintaining a resident-centered community within such a context is clearly stated and resonates in other chapters as well. The 1987 Nursing Home Reform Act formalized the necessity for nursing homes to employ social workers to attend to the psychosocial needs of nursing home residents. However, most homes would employ only one social worker and possibly, one or two assistants. It means that social workers would have to balance the expectation to cooperate with nursing staff and home administrators and assertiveness about their professional mandate to be client-centred.

Chapter 2 addresses the conflicting role and expectations of a social worker in nursing home, using a systems perspective, and argues for adherence to professional values and ethics. The author suggests relating to home residents as primary clients and the nursing home as a secondary client. As such social workers should advocate on behalf of residents and work towards promoting an institution (residents' eco-system) that is responsive to the needs and rights of residents.

In chapter 3 the author writes about the therapeutic value of reminiscence and life review for older persons and the use of reminiscence groups in social work practice to meet the psychosocial needs of residents. She provides practical guidance and tips on running reminiscence groups.

Chapter 4 is titled "The art of social work" but it should be more aptly titled "The arts in social work" as the author describes the use of various types of arts and crafts, the organizing of art exhibitions, and other special art initiatives with senior residents, for personal enjoyment and contributions to community life in the home. Those without an arts background need not be daunted, as social workers can create programmes in collaboration with artists, others in the outside community who have such interests, and other nursing home staff. The integration of arts with life review process, plus the involvement of a television station, seems rather successful.

Chapter 5 is a discussion of various specialized resident programmes to meet the needs of specific client groups: multisensory group for residents with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, support groups that are organized around medical conditions such as stroke and low vision, residents' councils, and current event groups.

Unlike the earlier chapters devoted to residents, chapter 6 is about promoting healthier staff-resident interactions. This chapter specifically addresses the role of social workers in in-service staff training in developing staff empathy and sensitivity in relating to residents. It also focuses attention on making changes in nursing home organizational culture that tends to emphasize efficiency over personal and emotional care.

Chapter 7 turns to yet another important source of support for residents, that is, their family members. The author introduces the use of family councils to facilitate family involvement in the care of home residents and other practices such as family support groups and family parties.

Chapter 8 introduces the concept of rituals and use of rituals and ceremonies to mark the residents' passage of life, living and dying in a nursing home. The author provides advice in creating a sense of community through rituals such as memorial tea service, remembrance tables, annual memorial services, and caring hearts programme.

The next three chapters are comparatively brief, in a sense, wrapping up the book with important tasks to be done. Chapter 9 is about the paper work required of social workers in a nursing home, including developing a care plan whereas chapter 10 promotes evaluation of social work practice rather than offer instruction on how to do evaluation. And chapter 11 is about getting social support as a professional social worker and practicing self-care in coping with the challenges of working in a nursing home. This is particularly critical when we consider the lone position of a social worker in a secondary setting dominated by other disciplines, which may be overwhelming.

The last chapter provides a few final thoughts and the invitation to readers to “take what you want” from the book, reflecting a pervasive tone of respect for others and gentleness in presenting social work values and ideals. Though some of the programmes, such as reminiscence groups and support groups, are not new there are several programmatic ideas worth trying as these aim to tap into the creativity of the worker and residents, promote integration of body-mind-spirit functioning, and connect residents, family members, and the larger community together.

I commend this book to social work students, beginning and seasoned social workers, since books specifically focused on social work practice in nursing homes are uncommon. Concepts and theories are introduced, without rambling as some do, and case examples are given. References are also provided to indicate the author’s source of information for practice and for those who want to find out more about social work interventions described. Overall, it is a readable book that shows how a social worker can draw from knowledge and skills in social work, as well as the arts, to improve the psychosocial care of nursing home residents.

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