

SOCIAL WORK IN MENTAL RETARDATION

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OPSOMMING

'n Omwenteling is vandag besig om plaas te vind binne die veld van geestesvertraagtheid. Die konsep van die totale mensbenadering wat in die psigiatrie geld, bring verrykende gevolge vir die multi-professionele span mee wat met die geestesvertraagde mens gemoed is. Daar word van die professionele persoon verwag om genoemde mens binne die gesinsverband te behandel, terwyl daar vir sommige ouers en gemeenskappe slegs een oplossing vir hul probleem bestaan, naamlik institutionalisering van so 'n persoon.

Die verwydering van 'n geestesvertraagde uit die gesinsverband is nie noodwendig 'n oplossing vir die "probleem" nie — intendeel, daar kan 'n verdere isolasie tussen die gesinslede plaasvind as gevolg van hul onverwerkte onuitgesproke gevoelens oor die aangeleentheid.

Wat dit betref, is die ingesteldheid van die maatskaplike werker wat oor die gespesialiseerde kennis van gesinsdynamika beskik, van primêre belang, en medebepalend t.o.v. hoe (en of) die houding van die gemeenskap sal verander.

“**N**owadays, the care of the mentally handicapped person at home is very much family psychiatry.”¹

In this article the field of mental retardation will be examined focusing on the changes that have taken place in this field. In so doing an attempt will be made to indicate that because of these changes, new ideas and attitudes, the role of the social worker has emerged as a very important one.

The family system is regarded as the most important of all social systems. The social worker's training incorporates the study of human behaviour, human relationships and the functioning of social systems. Thus the social worker has an understanding of problems as they relate to and affect families and of problems as they relate to the community. In other words the social worker has a role in social problems and therefore possibly a specialised role in the field under discussion. A brief look at the existing institutions (centres, agencies, societies) for the mentally retarded, however, reveals that social workers are few and far between. For example at Alexandra Care and Rehabilitation Centre there is one social worker to 850 in-patients. This one social worker also works with numerous out-patients and participates in rendering the community service. The out-patients service at Alexandra Care and Rehabilitation Centre consists of family diagnostic interviews conditioned by the multiprofessional team. As a member of the team and equipped with a special knowledge of family dynamics and functioning, the social worker acts

as liaison between the Centre and the referring body or agency. Furthermore it is the responsibility of the social worker to ensure that the information provided by the referring agency is specific to the criteria laid out by the multiprofessional team. During the diagnostic interview with the family (preferably the professional involved should also be present) the social worker's presence ensures an astute diagnosis of family functioning.

The community service is a continuation of the out-patient service described above. This service also includes the social worker acting in a consultative capacity to colleagues working in the community. An integral part of the community service is to ensure that the residents' integration with the community is enhanced. The social worker is responsible for the education of the community, which is necessary in order to facilitate boarding and occupation. The existing institutions do not appear to make sufficient provision for the profession. Why?

Perhaps the answer to this lies in the fact that the entire field of mental retardation is undergoing changes — changes in attitudes, management and treatment of the mentally retarded — changes which began universally about fifteen to twenty years ago. It appears that the mental health professionals of the nineteenth century were very involved in the field of mental retardation. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century the "tragic interlude" (4, p.714) led the field of mental retardation into the darkness. The first twenty years of the twentieth century were marked by banishing the

Social Work And Mental Retardation

Daniel F McAuley



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