

*"The welfare of each is bound up in the welfare of all."
Helen Keller*

The Appogg Social Work Service at Mater Dei Hospital

The very first referral I ever had, when I started working in the field, was from one of the Orthopaedic Wards. I remember approaching the patient with some nervousness, little knowing that the lady in question was much more apprehensive of the outcome of our conversation. A few days earlier, she had sustained a fall necessitating an emergency operation. Previously she had been the fulcrum of her family. Now she had to re-learn how to walk – how to do her daily activities slowly – how to depend on others. It is no wonder her eyes held fear and worry.

Facing the Fear

This fear of the future is endemic in most of the patients that we intervene with. It is not easy to accept that control is not in one's grasp. This fear, too, is paralleled by the fear the relatives feel, not being comfortable with the fact that their loved one is simply not the same and that life as they know it is about to change. Fear can be rather debilitating and it is here that our role is imperative in dissipating that fear to the point where solutions are possible and decisions taken. People who are in need of medical treatment need guidance beyond the actual identification or treatment of that particular medical problem. And it is here that the social worker works best, being that one of our core professional values is purposeful expression of feeling, enabling the expression of concerns, needs and preferences.

We, the Appogg social workers at Mater Dei, focus on offering a holistic service to improve the quality of life of the service user both during the stay in hospital and after discharge for up to 1 month, having either closed the case situation or put the service user in touch with other community services including our parallel services at Agenzija Appogg, Home Help, Telecare, Meals on Wheels, Hope (support for pregnant mothers) amongst others. We provide assistance in the care-plan and/or discharge-plan of the service user which should help him/her achieve optimum levels of functioning.

Our referrals stem from all in-patient departments, covering all orthopaedic, surgical, medical, paediatrics and obstetrics wards, as well as other wards, such as the infection control, burns unit, neurosurgical/medical etc. Social workers are assigned to particular wards which helps in establishing particular specialities which, benefits our patients. Considering our background is one that focuses on a social perspective, we have to work hard to make sure that we are in a position to 'translate' and 'decode' medical terminology into a holistic discharge. The service is also extended to casualty and its adjoining wards.

Professionals referring to the social work service at Mater Dei include consultants, doctors, nursing officers and nurses, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, other medical and paramedical staff. Social workers and other professionals within the Foundation for Social Welfare Services also forward their referrals, as do those social workers from the Department for the Elderly.

The social worker working within the health sector today is dynamic in helping the service users and their families find a way through the complex care system and back to

the world outside. And the lady in the Orthopaedic Ward will not fear unduly that she is losing her independence, because usually there is a solution.

Case Situations

Admission into hospital is necessitated, in the greater part, in situations of crisis - traumatic onset of illnesses, severe falls-in the most part at home, respiratory difficulties or strokes, among others.

- 73 year old man, who is also his wife's carer. Admitted with shortness of breath and needing daily oxygen. His children all live abroad and he has no one to care for him or even to supervise his discharge.
- 27 year old woman who was admitted for observation due to having sustained head injuries by her husband – in fear of her young 2 year old son's safety.
- 76 year old woman admitted after falling in the road. Children unable to care for their mum since they all have other heavy commitments.
- 80 year old lady with severe diabetic complications, who is her son's main carer, being that her son has a mental health issue. Needing hospitalisation and refusing to stay since her son will be unsupervised.
- 63 year old lady, admitted with severe neglect and with maggots. Home in a neglectful state and overrun by rats.
- 82 year old lady admitted after sustaining a fall at home. Records show that this is the fourth admission. Suspected abuse.
- 18 year old man who was admitted after attempting suicide. Presenting problem was a relationship break-up, but on further assessment, it was discovered he never took medication for ADHD since his family thought it was not appropriate. Severe renal problems due to the ingested medication.

Responding to these situations requires core competencies such as

- Intervening to facilitate optimum social and emotional well-being among the service user and the care givers,
- Supporting and assisting the service user during crises situations following traumatic events,
- Intervening with other medical professionals to ensure a smooth transition according to discharge plan – including joint home visits, ward visits, case reviews, ward meetings,
- Intervening and referring to other services accordingly to improve the quality of life of the service user,
- Liaising between the service user, his/her carers/family members and other professionals.

Benniena

*A lot of teenage mothers really don't grasp the responsibility factor until baby is home. –
it is only when the baby is home that it hits how difficult and real the responsibility is.
(16 year old mum)*

Benniena is an offshoot of the Hospital Social Work Service, and is an integral part of the team. This team's referrals originate from the Gynae/Obstetrics wards, and Paediatric wards. When a referral reaches our office, we take up the case, supporting and assisting the mother-to-be, prior and most especially, post birth. We also serve as a liaison between the mother and hospital staff and/or between the mother and other concerned parties.

Referral situations include single mothers (separated, divorced, living alone, or widowed); mothers having financial difficulty and/or a difficult medical condition. Furthermore, we also deal with situations such as those involving prostitution, rape, any form of substance abuse, and also cases where the mother has physical or mental health issues. Additionally, we work with children who have medical problems; newborn babies born with withdrawal symptoms, and with their parents.

Interventions include social work support and practical help, imparting legal guidelines and social responsibilities. We also provide information about existing services and how one can apply for these, as well as liaise with other agencies and professionals. Our service also encompasses the family network of the service user giving support or otherwise accordingly.

Case Situations

- 23 year old woman, 7 months pregnant, whose partner has just terminated the relationship because he cannot face parenthood. He also threw her out of the house.
- 20 year old woman, with substance abuse problems, who has given birth to a baby with withdrawal symptoms.
- 12 year old girl with multiple admissions, always complaining of abdominal pains.

Responding to these situations requires core competencies such as

- Providing assistance in cases where the mother-to-be is subject to domestic violence.
- Helping relatively young mothers come to terms with their pregnancy and give them support in for example, helping them break the news to their family and friends.
- Guiding young fathers-to-be on what should be their next step and what are their new responsibilities.
- Assisting those mothers-to-be who are currently dependent on some form of substance, and refer them to other services who can help them with their substance abuse problem.

For further details on APPOGG visit www.appogg.gov.mt. Agenzija APPOGG forms part of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, which also incorporates Agenzija Sedqa (www.sedqa.gov.mt) and Agenzija SAPPOR (www.sappor.gov.mt).

Josanne Abela, Service Area Leader, Appogg Social Work Services

Fact Box

Appogg Health Social Workers are located at Mater Dei Hospital (including Bennisena); Qormi Health Centre; Boffa Hospital; St. Vincent de Paule Residence and now also within Community Mental Health. The service was initiated in 1996, back then still at St. Luke's Hospital, with two full time and three part-time social workers, as well as an administrative support worker. Nowadays the service has grown to eight full time social workers. Between January and June 2008 the social work unit handled 380 cases out of which 243 were new patients.

References:

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