

Diagnosis and Social Work Scope of Practice: Regulation & Limitations



February 2017

Introduction

The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) is the regulatory body and professional association representing close to 1,900 members provincially. The NBASW is currently in the process of reopening its provincial legislation. The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers' Act was enacted in 1988 and after nearly thirty years is in need of modernization. While many of the proposed changes to the Act seek to improve processes or update language, the addition of diagnosis to the social work scope of practice is a more significant change. This document seeks to define the concept of social work diagnosis in New Brunswick as well as provide context into the types of regulation and limitations that would be imposed in order to ensure that only social workers with the appropriate level of training and clinical experience are granted the ability to assess, diagnose and treat mental, emotional and behavioural disorders, conditions and addictions.

Diagnosis and Social Work

The inclusion of diagnosis within the social work scope of practice has been adopted by social work regulatory bodies in many Canadian provinces including British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan. In North America at least 53 provinces or states allow social workers to do some form of diagnosis.

Within the Canadian context, mental health is currently a priority for both the provincial and federal governments. With the high demand for access to mental health services many provinces are struggling to meet the need. Allowing for a small number of specialized social workers to diagnose certain mental health conditions may permit a quicker and more efficient response to mental health needs. By allowing social workers to diagnose individuals with less complex conditions, this reduces the demand on the system thereby ensuring that individuals with complex conditions are able to access the specialist services of physicians, psychologists and psychiatrists sooner. Going hand in hand with diagnosis, social workers are well-equipped to provide counselling and can also serve as navigators in connecting individuals to other programs and services.

It should be understood that the intention is not to allow all Registered Social Workers to make diagnoses but rather that the NBASW would have the ability to establish qualifying criteria for social workers with the appropriate education and clinical experience to do so. In addition to practical applications in the mental health field, the ability to diagnose may be relevant in the context of social workers completing court ordered evaluations (such as parenting capacity assessments, home studies or child interviews) or social workers working in the field of addictions.

Regulation and Limitations

Ensuring the protection of the public and the provision of quality social work services to New Brunswickers is a primary focus of the NBASW. As a result, there is a strong commitment to ensuring that the responsibility of diagnosis is entrusted only to social workers who meet appropriate educational and training requirements. The NBASW is proposing to model its regulation of social work diagnosis on regulations established by the Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers (SASW). In Saskatchewan, social workers are permitted to apply for an “Authorized Practice Endorsement”(APE) which is a specialized classification that permits qualified clinical social workers to assess, diagnose and treat mental, emotional and behavioural disorders, conditions and addictions. Social workers with APE are permitted to use the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM). In order to obtain APE classification, social workers must successfully demonstrate their competency to practice clinical social work. The following sections will describe the educational and practice requirements that the NBASW proposes for social workers seeking to diagnose.

Academic

Social workers wishing to diagnose will require a minimum of a Masters of Social Work (MSW) degree from an accredited Canadian social work program (or an accepted equivalent) with a focus on direct clinical practice. The NBASW will look to the regulations of the SASW to establish the types of educational courses required within a MSW program in order to be considered clinical in focus. Some possible types of courses may include: psychotherapeutic methods, psychopathology, working with specific populations, and inter-professional practice.

Clinical Experience

Social workers will be required to provide documentation confirming that they have completed a supervised clinical practicum placement (of an established minimum number of hours) in which they engaged in assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental, emotional or behavioural disorder, conditions or addictions, as part of their Master of Social Work program. Following their MSW degree, social workers must also complete a designated number of supervised work hours in a clinical setting approved by the NBASW. In Saskatchewan, supervision may be provided by social workers with APE classification, psychologists with APE classification or psychiatrists. A similar type of supervision model could be adopted with partners in New Brunswick.

For social workers who completed their Masters of Social Work degree prior to the introduction of social work diagnosis in New Brunswick, an increased number of hours of work in a supervised clinical setting could be considered in lieu of the clinical practicum placement.

References

As part of their application for this specialized classification, social workers will be required to provide references from clinical supervisors (within the MSW practicum placement and post-

degree) attesting to the social workers' skill and level of competency to assess, diagnose and treat mental, emotional or behavioural disorder, conditions or addictions. Social worker will also be required to provide a current criminal record check and proof of liability insurance coverage (level of acceptable coverage to be determined).

Written Examination

Once social workers have completed all requirements listed above they will be eligible to write a clinical examination approved by the NBASW in order to establish their competence and suitability to engage in social work diagnosis. In Saskatchewan and British Columbia the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) clinical examination is the approved examination. The NBASW is in the process of determining what type of examination tool will be most appropriate in New Brunswick. A minimum passing grade will be established as well as limitations around the number of attempts that can be made in order to successfully pass the exam.

As described above, the NBASW is committed to the development of a robust process to regulate social work diagnosis in New Brunswick. In addition to the eligibility criteria described above, the NBASW proposes that certain limitations be placed on social workers who achieve this specialized classification. Social workers will be expected to practice within their scope of knowledge and training, which will vary from social worker to social worker. Common types of diagnoses may include, but are not limited to: anxiety, depression, and addictions such as alcoholism. As with all social work practice, social workers who are presented with situations that exceed their level of competence and skill are required to refer to an appropriately trained practitioner. Consultation and collaboration with, or referrals to, other diagnosticians may be considered appropriate in situations of complex mental health issues such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Social workers who attain the specialized classification required in order to diagnose will also be obligated to show that a proportion of their annual continuing education hours have been completed in an area related to clinical practice.

Conclusion

The NBASW recognizes the great responsibility held by health professionals when participating in the diagnosis and treatment of New Brunswickers. It is with this responsibility in mind that the NBASW proposes the regulation and limitations described above for the introduction of social work diagnosis in New Brunswick. In partnership with other health professionals such as physicians, nurses, psychologists, and psychiatrists, the NBASW is confident that the introduction of social work diagnosis in New Brunswick can lead to improved mental health service delivery and positive outcomes for the citizens of our province.