

Social work vital in mental health cases



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IN A recent coroner's report on the tragic death of 15-year-old schoolgirl Michaela Mundy, one particular sentence struck me.

"Social workers are no doubt very useful in dealing with the mildest of depression cases, however, the current approach where there is a very flat structure with many social workers, a number of psychologists, and less than half of a psychiatrist for 220 to 250 patients, is inappropriate."

As a professional and accredited mental health social worker with more than 25 years of experience, that comment came as a blow. Many mental health providers were involved in this case over many months, so why was the focus put on one profession?

Community mental health services have traditionally and effectively operated as multi-

disciplinary teams. In my view, to single out a specific profession in tragic circumstances such as these is both naive and ill-informed.

All professionals, including psychiatrists, are well aware that distressed and depressed teenagers with histories of family breakdown and no secure feeling of where they belong, can be extremely hard to engage in treatment.

Psychiatrists have no "magic bullet" which enables them to fix the complex issues in which such teenagers are immersed, any more than other mental health professionals. On a practical level, few psychiatrists are prepared to work in public mental health settings, so their presence in the multi-disciplinary team is often limited to case consultation and review.

The limited perspective of social work expressed by the coroner may be because of the legal profession's contact with the child protection field, in which social workers predominantly practice case management rather than clinical work,

important and complex work in its own right and requiring skilful input.

In the mental health field, social workers have provided treatment in community and inpatient mental health services for decades.

The profession of social work contributes extensively to the mental health sectors dealing with the most difficult and severe mental illness.

Social workers have a strong and continuing place in the treatment of mental illness

Social work courses have counselling training that is equal, if not better, to that of undergraduate psychology training. Many social workers do postgraduate education to add to their clinical expertise.

Professional social workers have a strong and continuing place in the treatment of mental illness. Their strength is the ability to engage people in their families, communities and the networks in which they live and work.

In fact, without the contri-

bution of professional social workers, the services offered in community mental health services would be decimated.

Let us not expect miracles in fixing mental illness. It takes years to develop, and recovery is not an overnight process.

Treatment can take many forms, and sadly, sometimes the systems are not comprehensive or resourced enough to stop tragedy.

It's vital we rigorously review these systems and support the dedicated staff working in multi-disciplinary teams, rather than making damaging and critical comments about individual or professional groups on which so many services depend.

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