

Position statement: Allied Health Assistants

Introduction

The role of allied health assistants has been gradually implemented in some services across Australia over the last few years. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) believes that allied health assistants are one means to facilitate more effective social work services. It is the position of the AASW that while allied health assistants can greatly contribute to social work practice, they must be supervised by professional social workers, be appropriately qualified, only work within a clearly defined role and must never be used as a replacement for a qualified social worker. This document provides an overview of the AASW's position on allied health assistants and how the association believes they can support the role of social workers.

Background

While allied health assistants are well established and have provided support to a number of allied health professionals in Australia (i.e., physiotherapists, speech pathologists and occupational therapists), providing support to social workers is a relatively new role. There are allied health assistant roles emerging across Australia in numerous practice contexts, including health, disability through the NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme) and aged care. At a policy level (State/Federal) there is significant support to implement allied health assistant positions in the health workforce. Internationally, the allied health assistant role is well established in the USA and UK, primarily in health care settings.

There are no formal qualifications currently required, but Certificate IV in Allied Health Assistance, Certificate III in Aged Care or similar vocational qualifications are preferred.¹ In 2016, the Community Services & Health Industry Skills Council developed new standards for the Certificate IV, which now includes specific social work competencies.² The social work content within the Certificate IV AHA course must be taught by a qualified social worker (eligible for AASW membership).

Rationale for introducing allied health assistants to support social workers

The introduction of allied health assistants has been driven by^{3 4}:

- The need to optimise the effectiveness, productivity and capacity of the allied health workforce.
- Reduce unmet demand for patient care by increasing overall EFT staff.
- Desire by social work staff to reclaim 'core business' and strengthen professional identity.
- Increase time for advanced practice by social work professionals.

The allied health assistant role

The AASW understands the allied health assistant role to be any role where an individual undertakes a task delegated by a qualified social worker to support the delivery of social work services. The allied health assistant should not be used as a replacement for a qualified social worker. While the allied

¹ Queensland Department of Health (2014) *Guideline for social work assistant training*, Allied Health Professions' Office of Queensland

² https://training.gov.au/TrainingComponentFiles/HLT/HLT43015_R1.pdf

³ O'Malia, A., Hills, A., & Wagner, S. (2014) Repositioning social work in the modern workforce: The development of a social work assistant role, *Australian Social Work*, 67(4), 593-603.

⁴ Della-Vecchia, L. & Somerville, L. (2013) *AHA Project: Allied Health Assistant Role in Social Work*, Alfred Health, Victoria

health assistant is responsible for the task, the social worker remains ethically and professionally responsible for the client.

Other terms for allied health assistants can include allied health support staff and allied health support workers.

Overview of the AASW's position

The following three points articulate the position of the AASW on the use of allied health assistants in social work practice:

1. Allied health assistants must be supervised by qualified social workers

- An allied health assistant should only facilitate the delivery of social work services if supervised by a qualified social worker who is eligible for AASW membership. A line manager who is not a qualified social worker or other health professional supervising an allied health assistant in the delivery of social work related services would constitute a breach of duty of care and in conflict with the *AASW Code of Ethics*.
- The supervising social worker must ensure that allied health assistants behave in a manner consistent with the *AASW Code of Ethics*.
- The supervising social worker is responsible for the duty of care to the client. They must also provide appropriate supervision and accept responsibility for the work of the allied health assistant. The supervising social worker, therefore, must develop documents to guide the practice of the allied health assistant and provide supervision, adequate training and establish the competency of the support worker to carry out the delegated tasks.
- Determining appropriate tasks for an allied health assistant is a complex activity and should only be undertaken by social workers with experience and knowledge of supervision and delegation. The *AASW Code of Ethics* and *AASW Supervision Standards* provide the principles to support delegation of tasks to support workers.

2. Range of suitable tasks for the allied health assistant role

Allied health assistants must never be seen as a substitute for a qualified social worker. The profession's education and training is structured to equip social workers with a range of competencies to manage the complexity involved in relation to the psychosocial aspects of health and wellbeing. These are complex tasks that require significant skills, knowledge and experience, and therefore are not transferable to support workers.

Higher complexity tasks are core components of a social worker's scope of practice and therefore the AASW asserts the following tasks are NOT suitable for delegation:

- Responsibility for patient care
- Case management and care coordination
- Complex assessments (e.g., psychosocial, mental health, abuse, risk, financial)
- Counselling, mediation and any kind of therapeutic intervention
- Complex advocacy
- Treatment and discharge planning
- Crisis interventions (e.g., trauma, abuse and family violence)
- Grief, loss and bereavement interventions

Further information about the role, scope and contribution of social workers in the health care field is available in the AASW's Scope of Social Work Practice: Health, Hospital Social Work and other related Scope of Practice documents on [our website](#).

3. Recommended allied health assistant qualifications

- Given the degree of complexity involved in providing support to a social worker, the AASW recommends that allied health assistants must have the highest level of suitable qualifications. The AASW recommends that allied health assistants have, or are working towards, a Certificate IV in Allied Health Assistance, or equivalent, and that this must be paralleled with continuing workplace training.
- The Certificate IV Allied Health Assistance programs are the only ones with specific social work electives available for students. Completion of the social work electives is considered important selection criteria in order to carry out the role.

Conclusion

In summary, it is the position of the AASW that while allied health assistants can and already do play a role in the delivery of social work related services, they should never be seen as a substitute for a qualified social worker. Furthermore, in carrying out their role they should be adequately trained, work within a well-defined role and supervised only by professional social workers.