

The Training of Medicosocial Workers¹

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MARY ANTOINETTE CANNON, Director of the Department of Social Work of the University of Puerto Rico during the academic year 1941-1942, published an article in *The Puerto Rico Health Bulletin* of last September on the training of medicosocial workers. Miss Cannon is a wise educator, an experienced practitioner in this field, and her authority is widely recognized. Therefore, I take the liberty of quoting here Miss Cannon's summary of the aims and objectives in the University's educational program for medicosocial work.

Education for medical social work is a system in which subject matter, philosophy, and technique derived from appropriate discipline and professions are focussed upon problems of sickness, disease, and disability, with their social causes and effects. The major sources are economic, sociological, psychiatric, medical, legal, statistical, and of social work itself. In this educational system the student's ability to integrate and apply the academic learning is developed and tested in the field of practice under supervision.

According to present requirements here and on the continent, a person who contemplates entering the profession of social service should have a college education. The demand for mature students with a capacity for advanced study has proved a powerful argument in support of raising the level of professional training to the graduate basis. Care is therefore exercised in the selection of candidates through the study of their academic background and personal references, by interviews, and such criteria as may help to estimate their possibilities as potential social workers.

The complete course at the University is planned on a two years' basis; the basic courses are given mostly during the first year. Fundamental training on certain subjects is required of all social workers, no matter to what specialty they are planning to dedicate themselves.

The University is concerned with offering all students training along various broad lines: social case work, community organization, group work, social research, social planning, and social legislation.

Thus the student is directed into certain required subjects, among others: Social Case Work, Group Work, The Community, Personality and Behaviour, History of Social Work, Medical Information for Social Workers, Public Health, Statistics, Government and Social Work, and Public Welfare. Such courses as the Sociological Approach to Social Problems, Labor Problems, Legal Aspects of Social Legislation, Social Insurance, and Population Problems are also given with the idea of filling in gaps in the preprofessional equipment of the worker. All courses are planned especially for the group, applying their content to concrete situations. In addition, the University aims to give the student a good perception of local social, political, and economic life and to acquaint him with those problems for which economists, sociologists, planners, and administrators are seeking solutions. A student planning to specialize in medicosocial work will, therefore, have more or less the same program during his first year as one aspiring to enter the field of child or family welfare, public assistance, psychiatric social work, or any other specialized practice.

As the purpose of social work training is not only to impart an academic knowledge of subject matter but also to test out theoretical learning in practice, a program of field work is indispensable. Students at the University spend fifteen hours a week, or about two hundred and forty hours a semester, practicing social work under supervision. If these students are beginners, they are placed during the first semester either at the Training Center in Child Welfare at the Public Health Unit in Río Piedras, which aims to offer generalized experience under one of the department's field instructors, or under the supervision of trained social workers of the various agencies in the community. Close contact is maintained between these agencies and the faculty through visits, consultations, conference, and seminars where problems of supervision, agency procedures, and training are discussed.

The University utilizes the services of the medicosocial workers of the Department of Health and has placed some of its students at the Bayamón District Hospital and in the Public Health Units of San Juan, Santurce, and Río Piedras. For others interested in children's work, placements have been arranged in institutions, in schools, and with probation officers of the insular and federal courts. Last summer one of the faculty members spent all her time at the Bayamón District Hospital with a group of medicosocial work students. The benefits derived, from the point of view of training, were

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many, and the opportunity was well utilized to further the hospital's appreciation for medicosocial work. This semester has seen the start of a second training center at the Río Piedras Health Unit, where a group is acquiring practice under the same faculty member who directed the Bayamón group, an instructor especially qualified for supervision of field work.

Recently the American Association of Medical Social Workers stipulated that four hundred hours would be considered the minimum requirement for field work in the full course in medical social work and also for membership in the Association. The University of Puerto Rico works on the same principles, both as regards academic courses and field work, as the schools of social work in the United States, but allows for those variations necessary to adapt its program to the particular abilities of the student and to the specific needs of the community.

The student body is made up of two groups: one composed of regular students who are taking the complete program and a larger group of part-time students, all workers with some training and experience who are furthering their professional career. Because of the present great demand in Puerto Rico for social workers, full-time students leave the University at the end of one year. The University therefore tries to be responsive to these needs without unduly relaxing its fundamental requirements for a professional education. Although it plans to give students a full year of basic training, it remains aware of the demand of the field and is realistically conscious of the nature of the work required by the different agencies of the community. For this reason the University gives some of the students specialized experience during the second semester according to their individual aptitudes and inclinations. Otherwise all specialization comes during the second year. For the medicosocial workers this means a special placement in field work and such classroom subjects, as Case Work with the Sick, Organization of Health Care, and Hospitals and Clinics. Elective subjects, which will round up their training and help them in their choice of thesis subjects, are also offered.

The courses in Medical Information and in Public Health, prepared in consultation with the Faculty of the School of Tropical Medicine and Staff of the Department of Health, are taught by members of these organizations who are responsible for these aspects of teaching. Their invaluable contribution is indispensable to the plans of the Department of Social Work and will only be measured

by the ultimate gains of the people whom all—physicians, nurses, educators, social workers, and sanitary engineers—hope to serve. The purpose of the course in Medical Information is "to help social workers to cooperate with doctors and nurses in problems in which medical and social factors combine. To this end students are taught to understand medical method as an informed lay person can understand it. The material used illustrates problems including the commoner types of disease and defect with particular emphasis on infections, parasitic and nutritional problems peculiar to Puerto Rico."

The course in Public Health "presents information as to major health problems of the Island, as they are related to the social and physical environment, rural and urban. It includes discussion of the epidemiology and public health administrative methods for control of tropical diseases such as hookworm, malaria, dysentery, and also venereal diseases, tuberculosis, and problems related to maternal and child health."

Medicosocial workers are being used more and more by administrators, nurses, and other members of the staffs of public health departments to increase and facilitate cooperative work with the social agencies in the community. This is especially true of the Department of Health of Puerto Rico, where the social worker is making a definite contribution.

The University feels that there is a special need for social workers who, in addition to giving skillful service, can get along well with the community. A social worker who is not acceptable to his community will not succeed, and his training will have been in vain. Therefore, training in the art of dealing with the representatives of a community is infused into all university teaching, whether it be case work, community organization, social interpretation, group work method, or supervised field experience.

The Department of Social Work of the University of Puerto Rico plans to develop more and better relationships with allied professions through personal contacts, discussions, conferences, institutes, and courses. During the past two years members of the department participated in the teaching of public health nurses at the School of Tropical Medicine. This was a splendid opportunity for learning what each profession does and how the profession of social service can be coordinated with others for more effective service. At present, a course in the Fundamentals of Social Work is being taught to senior students of the Home Economics Department of the University. There are many lessons to be learned from these future

home economists of Puerto Rico and much to pool together with them for the sake of good living standards for the Island. Low income, economic dependency, poor health, poor nutrition, undesirable housing, and lack of education are so interrelated that one who is aware of these aspects of island conditions cannot escape wishing to coördinate all allied activities for a frontal attack against these problems.

The University's firm belief, therefore, in professional education for social workers lies in the recognition of the task required of them. If one considers at all times the needs of the people one is trying to serve and their right to understanding and to intelligent help, one will be continually preoccupied about one's ability as a social worker. The training of social workers to assist doctors, nurses, health officers, and other persons concerned with the health of the needy is a matter for serious thought on the part of all members of the Department of Social Work. They would be glad to receive the assistance available in the community in order to do their own part well, for over and above the academic and practical training that they hope to impart to their students, they would like to send forth into the field workers with a good knowledge of the ethics of their profession, as well as an intelligent understanding of the ethics of medicine and nursing; with a sound and sincere interest in the health of the individual and of the community; with an undying respect for that individual and a determination to execute faithfully the responsibilities assumed in his behalf.

The University also hopes to train workers to be increasingly aware of the ever changing demands of the community. In these times of crisis it is expected that each one do his share in helping achieve the objectives of democracy.

During the years ahead everyone will be called upon to help in the task of individual rehabilitation and world reconstruction. This will demand the flexibility, conviction, imagination, discipline, and knowledge which social work should offer. The preservation of the right of the individual to meet his human needs in the world to come is, I believe, one of the great responsibilities of the professional groups represented by such organizations as "The Puerto Rico Public Health Association." In this challenging endeavor of conserving and developing human values all social workers wish to participate.