

Understanding the impact of vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue on hospital social workers

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Health

**South Eastern Sydney
Local Health District**

Compassion Fatigue & Vicarious Trauma in Hospital-Based Social Workers

- Collaborative research undertaken in partnership between University of Wollongong and South East Sydney Local Health District since 2017
- Four major metropolitan hospitals involved: St George Hospital, Sutherland Hospital, Prince of Wales Hospital and Sydney/ Sydney Eye Hospital
- 100 social workers employed across the four hospitals
- Research team made up of eight social workers across all levels of management, clinicians and educators. Students and a research assistant also involved at various times.

Current situation

- The majority of social workers in NSW are employed in the health setting
- In hospitals social workers work in almost every inpatient ward, outpatient clinic and on call 24 hours a day
- Compassion fatigue is a phenomenon in caring professions where working with traumatised individuals leads you over time to become exhausted and less able to empathise. Vicarious trauma is the acquisition of trauma-like symptoms from exposure to another's stories of trauma.
- Workplace health & safety guidelines exist in NSW Health and refer to psychological symptoms – but do not clarify the psychological risks from working with patients and families. Social workers receive clinical supervision internally in their teams, however the guidelines do not mandate or require the discussion of this topic.
- This is overall a grey area for both NSW Health and Safe Work Australia with no clear direction for social workers or their managers.

Methodology

- Interface between principles of social work practice and research
 - In-built mentorship and need for research champion
 - Reflexivity and critical reflection: insider-outsider experience
 - Mutual trust and reciprocity
- Participatory action research with reflective cycles
- Collaborative research at all stages
- Literature review, online survey, in-depth interviews
- Findings are being finalised currently

Findings so far...

- Stories about the experience of social workers in the acute care setting
 - New understanding of a third dimension to vicarious trauma
 - When the trauma is still occurring but you are now part of it
- Language tells us a lot about lived experience... “battle field” “in the trenches” “in the line of fire”... Anxiety of oncall work and personal risk
- Stigma of compassion fatigue & vicarious trauma: strong versus weak
- Impact of management messaging and culture (direct and indirect)
 - Line management supervision: conflict of interest
 - Traits that social work managers in hospitals need to support staff
- Response needs to begin with the organisation and system, then the individual. The opposite leads to stigma.
- Need for workload safety - lack of best practice in this area means that there is subjectivity as to how the work is experienced
- Protective factors and compassion satisfaction: what makes people stay?

Into practice

- The tools for practice and supervision should have an evidence base within our clinician group to make a difference
- Educational and workforce development tools to increase staff knowledge and to equip both staff and managers including;
 - Training packages for social work staff and supervisors
 - Work health & safety guidelines
 - Updated clinical supervision guidelines
 - An instructive visual tool

Moving forward

- Expansion of the project in 2020: two different metropolitan hospitals, a regional hospital and three rural hospitals
- Establish the impact of geographical and socio-economic demographics on the workforce's capacity and resilience.
- Determine whether the educational and workforce development tools are transferable to other hospitals and local health districts, and their impact on reducing staff risk and increasing staff well being and retention.
- Increase understanding of the variables associated with the experience of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma in hospital-based social workers.
- Provide a recommendation to hospital social work departments across NSW Health as to an organisational response to compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, including the provision to these departments of tested educational and workforce development tools.
- Transferable outcomes to other professions

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