Rotating Social Work Students
Within a Medical Center

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The attention of the social work profession has been dramatically directed to the challenges of practice in the health field: the former "medical social work," a demure adjunct to medicine, has been reborn as "social work in the health field." The more positive connotation of the word "health" leads to more stringent demands that the social worker function as a full member of the health team with responsibility for structuring his role and his time, mediating between health systems, and acting as an innovator in efforts to develop more effective delivery systems.¹

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Schools of social work are responding to the challenge by developing concentrations in health within the MSW curriculum. Even so, the educator is hard put to expose the student to the wide range of concepts and skills necessary for social work to make an impact on health, or, more modestly, even to survive as a profession within the complex organization of health services and personnel.

Social work practice in general is in the throes of change. As the BSW degree becomes more accepted as the first level of practice, the MSW-holder is increasingly expected to occupy managerial and planning positions, as well as to offer specialized direct services. At the University of Utah Medical Center, social work faculty and agency field instructors have addressed the new conditions of practice in the health field by reorganizing the practicum in that hospital. The usual one-to-one assignment of student to supervisor was replaced by a rotation system, somewhat analogous to the rotations of medical students through various hospital services.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ROTATION

The Social Service Department consists of about twenty MSW-level workers, all of whom are committed to involvement in social work education. Most of the social service staff are veterans of the pattern of field instruc-

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2 At the Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education, Chicago, March 1975, a workshop entitled “Social Work As One of the Health Professions,” chaired by Yetta H. Appel, presented experiences with developing health concentrations at Case Western Reserve, Rutgers University, and University of Washington Schools of Social Work.

tion in which they supervised a single student for the entire course of an academic year.

Since 1972, the University of Utah School of Social Work has offered a combined-methods approach in the first year, followed by the opportunity to specialize in a method and field during the second year. The practicum is provided in learning centers that offered experiences in all methods. Ten to twelve first-year students are assigned to the Medical Center each year with a faculty member from the school of social work as coordinator.

Each student moves through three major service assignments during the year. The rotations are arranged so that each student will work on (1) an acute service, such as medicine, surgery, pediatrics, or obstetrics, (2) a chronic service such as rehabilitation, neurology, or oncology, and (3) either psychiatry, alcohol and drug treatment, or community medicine. In this way each student is exposed to a variety of paces, workloads, medical problems, and definitions of health-related concerns.

Each rotation lasts approximately two and a half months, conforming to the university’s quarter system. At the end of each rotation, the student changes primary field instructors, although he may retain selected assignments in order to complete a long-term experience with a case, group, or community project. In addition to the basic three rotations, other brief experiences are available. Each year, students may opt to lead groups in a nursing home or to undertake an administrative project with the department director, as well as to pick up cases in additional areas of interest.

The faculty field coordinator, who also acts as the students’ faculty adviser, is the constant figure throughout the year, meeting weekly with the student group, arranging individual conferences with students as needed, and maintaining regular feedback and communication with field instructors.
EVALUATING THE ROTATION

The effectiveness of any practicum in producing desired student behavior is difficult to measure. Even time-tested (but not time-proved) modes of field instruction have not yet been evaluated in a rigorous way. This article does not attempt to demonstrate the effectiveness of the rotation in other than subjective ways. The reactions of students and field instructors to the program were systematically collected, however, and these are presented to indicate the degree to which the shift in organization was accepted.

In the spring of 1974, anonymous questionnaires were administered to the twenty-two students who had experienced the rotation system. Ten students were then finishing their second year while twelve had just completed the rotation program of their first year. In addition, the fourteen agency social workers who had acted as practicum instructors for first-year students during the period under study were also polled. The instruments were designed to elicit positive and negative reactions to the program. Responses were received from 79 percent of the field instructors and 69 percent of the students. Student and practitioner comments were quite similar.

The disadvantages of the rotation identified by students included the loss of field instructors after brief periods, limits on opportunities for intensive involvement with clients, and the erosion of self-confidence because of the need for continuous fresh starts. Some students felt that the rotations placed them in an observer rather than an active role. Among the advantages cited were the exposure to a variety of services, problems, and worker styles, the broad exposure to the policies and practices of the agency, the opportunity to distinguish common aspects of social work practice and aspects distinctive to particular workers, the observation of inter-professional teamwork in various contexts, and the chance
to apply a wide range of classroom precepts. A number of students cited positively the "ability to see how social work fits into the overall picture." A pragmatic student found it advantageous for some instructor-student dyads "not to have to put up with each other for a whole year." Generally, the positive features were perceived to outweigh the negative.

Field instructors expressed some ambivalence. They saw advantages in that students were exposed to a range of problems and worker styles. The disadvantages were seen to derive from the limitations on long-term involvement with patients and personnel. The instructors saw the poorer student as suffering particularly from the rotational changes. One field instructor summed up the objections succinctly in the phrase, "By the time you know what's going on, it's time to move on."

Some field instructors expressed a sense of personal challenge in the increased and accelerated exposure to students. Many, however, also found the need for multiple orientations tedious and time-consuming, and found the arrangement of meaningful learning experiences more difficult. In assessing their overall satisfaction with the rotation, three field instructors stated they were very satisfied, five said they were satisfied, and two dissatisfied.

**Implications**

Although some field instructors expressed nostalgia for the more relaxed pace and closer relationship of the former one-to-one pattern, the agency staff was willing to commit itself to an approach that was perceived to offer educational benefits to the students. This attitude was possibly heightened because agency personnel participated in the committee work preceding the introduction of the rotation and engaged in regular feedback workshops. In this sense, the program grew out of genuine school-agency partnership.
From the perspective of the faculty coordinator, several aspects of the rotation seem to have implications for practicum education in general. It was observed, for instance, that when the period of field instruction is reduced to a few months, the orientation period to the service will be telescoped accordingly. Perhaps, the long period of “winding up” and “winding down” associated with field work was a luxury encouraged by the structure. If so, briefer rotations encourage profitable use of time.

The rotation helps the student recognize that the practitioner is responsible for defining his tasks according to judgments about problems and resources. As they observe how different workers set priorities differently, students are encouraged to draw their own conclusions about the delivery of services rather than to learn “the right way.” This fosters the independence and sense of accountability needed for social workers to make their unique contribution to the health field.

A field instruction structure should permit modeling of the kinds of behavior needed for practice. The protracted relationship with a single supervisor served as a model for an intensive casework relationship. In the health field presently, social workers are expected to be crisis-interveners, middle-managers, and program developers. They need to make quick and accurate assessments out of an understanding of the complex health care delivery system. It is hoped that the rotation, with the synthesizing help of the coordinator and full participation of agency staff, moves students in this desired direction.