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Non-Medical Mental Health Referrals: A Guide For General Practice

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Abstract

The results of part of a survey of mental health practitioners in Hong Kong are discussed with reference to similarities and differences in roles, definitions, education, training and professional regulation in their countries of origin. The need for more monitoring and regulation of non-medical mental health practitioners is considered in light of the concerns of general practitioners who want to make suitable referrals.

Keywords: Mental health, education, training, professional regulation.

Introduction

Interest in the mind-body connection has a long history. Research into how thoughts, emotions, moods and even personality can affect physical health has been prolific. It is now generally accepted that emotional disturbances, including stress and depression, may lead to and frequently occur together with physical disorders. In the United Kingdom, studies indicate that about 30% of the population are experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression at any point in time. In Hong Kong, Lee found the prevalence of psychiatric symptoms in an urban population sample to be 32%. In the first Hong Kong based, community-wide, epidemiological survey, lifetime prevalence rates of 39% (males) and 19% (females) were recorded for 19 commonly diagnosed psychiatric disorders.

Given the high incidence of mental health disturbance in the general population, it is clear that the general practitioner has a pivotal role to play in diagnosing and caring for individuals in whom the etiology of presenting symptoms is psychological or emotional. This may be regarded as a particular challenge in Hong Kong because of the well established tendency of the Chinese to somaticize emotional states and because there is still significant stigma attached to mental illness.

A number of alternatives are available to general practitioners in managing patients with psychological symptoms. Administering psychotropic medication continues to be a common method of treatment, although concern has been expressed about possible detrimental consequences arising from over-prescription. Counselling is also a frequent strategy of choice in the management of psychological problems. While general practitioners themselves are in a good position to counsel such patients, few have received training or are familiar with the process of counselling. In Hong Kong, a survey of general practitioners revealed that doctors have no difficulty in recognizing and differentiating anxiety and depression from other conditions and are
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alert to the fact that emotional disturbance maypresent as a physical disorder. However, when theuse of medication is inappropriate or alternativemeasures seem preferable, "the emphasis oncounselling or 'non-drug doctoring' is notsubstantial enough".¹⁴

While general practitioners themselves mayundertake the psychological management ofpatients within a primary care setting, referral toanother professional is frequently a consideration.Referral to and liaison with psychiatrists isincreasingly facilitated by their presence oncommunity mental health teams and the role ofpsychologists in primary health care is wellestablished.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Referral to social workers,counsellors and psychiatric nurses is also becomingmore common.¹⁸ However, the criteria andcharacteristics of GP referral with respect tomental health problems in Hong Kong are not yetwell documented,¹⁴ although we may speculatethat resources are more limited and less accessiblethan generally desired.

Furthermore, while medical practitioners arecarefully regulated, non-medical mental healthprofessionals, by and large, are not. Theseindividuals call themselves by various titles andpossess a wide range of educational backgrounds.¹⁹When a physician recognizes that a patient wouldbenefit from psychological help and believes thattheskills of a mental health professional arecalled for, the problem becomes one of making anappropriate referral.

The purpose of this paper is to present partof a survey which was originally designed to reviewand explain the various qualifications andcredentials of mental health practitioners in HongKong, for the benefit of prospective patients orclients, and to identify "qualified" practitionersproviding English-speaking mental health services.Since this paper is intended for physicians and thequalifications and credentialing of psychiatrists arewell known, only non-medical mental healthpractitioners will be discussed. The informationpresented here will focus on the practitionerqualification requirements for the most commonmental health professionals practicing in theUnited Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand,Canada and the United States, as well aspractitioners trained and qualified in Hong Kong.Since the practice of psychology andpsychotherapy and the provision of mental healthservices generally affects public health, safety andwelfare, physicians need to know what training hasbeen completed by the practitioner, whatqualifications are held and which services areprovided so that the best possible referral can be

Method

The survey was conducted using a range ofinformation gathering techniques. Standardizedletters requesting information about educationaland practice requirements for mental healthworkers were sent to the various regulatoryauthorities in the different geographic areas, suchas: the British Psychological Society, theAustralian Psychological Society and the MedicalBoard of California. Telephone and personalinterviews were held with a large number ofhealth care professionals who were helpful inreferring the researchers to the most authoritativesources of information. Where available, printedmaterials by the professional and licensing bodieswere also reviewed. As a result, information wasobtained providing definitions, roles, trainingqualifications and regulatory agencies for each ofthecategories of mental health practitioners,according to the country of professional origin.In all cases, the requested information wasreceived.

Results

There is a wide range in the definition, roleand level of education and training required formental health practitioners in the six countriesstudied. The credentialing procedure, where it
exists, is based on the identification of key facts and specific criteria. For a full exposition of the survey, reference should be made to the original publication.19

Psychologists

Definition

In Hong Kong and in the United Kingdom there is no legal or standardized definition of a psychologist, although they are generally regarded as individuals who have completed training at the Master (or equivalent) level (Table 1). In the United Kingdom, a Chartered Psychologist is one who is entered on the Register of the British Psychological Society as having reached sufficient standard for independent professional practice.

In the remaining countries surveyed, psychologists are defined, for the purposes of practice, with reference to established training and registration or licensing criteria. In the United States, the title of 'Psychologist' is regulated by certification laws and licenses which specify what activities constitute the practice of psychology.

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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>One who has completed a training course in psychology acceptable to APS.</td>
<td>Most employed by gov. dept., statutory authorities, hospitals, health services, schools, universities.</td>
<td>Bach. Psych. Hon. OR Bach.(any) AND grad. qual. ALSO 2 yr. supervision. CPs have Master/member APS Clin.Div. EPs have teacher training/experience also.</td>
<td>Practitioners must be registered in state. APS approves training programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANADA</td>
<td>One who is registered, certified or licensed for independent practice of psychology in a province.</td>
<td>Employed in hospitals, schools, organizations, private practice &amp; by government.</td>
<td>Master or Doctorate required for independent practice. Varies between provinces.</td>
<td>Provincial laws regulate practice &amp; boards, associations oversee. CPA/APA approval of training programs. Reg./cert/license required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITED STATES</td>
<td>One who has completed Ph.D. or D.Psy. training &amp; is licensed to practice psychology in a state.</td>
<td>As in Canada. Psychs. provide services according to qualifications and experience.</td>
<td>Bach. AND Ph.D./D.Psy. from accredited program. ALSO supervision AND licensing exam. EPs may be licensed with Master.</td>
<td>State laws &amp; regulations control practice. Various Boards, APA oversee. APA approval of training programs. License required.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: HKPS Hong Kong Psychological Society  
BPS British Psychological Society  
APS Australian Psychological Society  
CPA Canadian Psychological Association  
CP Clinical Psychologist  
EP Educational Psychologist  
APA American Psychological Association
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### Table 2: Social Workers

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<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HONG KONG</td>
<td>No legal or standardized definition. Generally regarded as in USA.</td>
<td>Most work for non-government organizations &amp; government.</td>
<td>Bach. S.W. Major OR 2 yr. Dip. 2 yr. Master also available.</td>
<td>HKASW regulates practice of members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>Someone who assists clients to identify needs, problems &amp; take responsible action.</td>
<td>Employed in many settings incl. hospitals, schools, gov. agencies, private practice.</td>
<td>Bach. S.W. Major OR 2 yr. undergrad. education AND 2 yr. supervision (also Bach.).</td>
<td>AASW has some regulatory responsibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW ZEALAND</td>
<td>No legal or standardized definition. Generally regarded as in Australia.</td>
<td>As in Australia.</td>
<td>Various. Bach., Master, Dip., Associate degree. No supervision requirements.</td>
<td>No information found.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITED STATES</td>
<td>Licensed, Master trained practitioner qualified to apply social work principles, methods to achieve better adjustment.</td>
<td>Employed by government, non-profit or profit organizations, private practice.</td>
<td>Bach. AND Master from accred. school. ALSO 2 yr. supervision AND licensing exam.</td>
<td>State Boards Behavioral Sciences, NASW regulates practice. License required.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: HKASW Hong Kong Association of Social Workers  
CCETSW Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work  
BASW British Association of Social Workers  
AASW Australian Association of Social Workers  
CASW Canadian Association of Social Workers  
NASW National Association of Social Workers

### Role

_Clinical_ psychologists generally are qualified to construct, administer and interpret psychological tests, including diagnostic evaluation. They treat psychological, emotional and mental disorders with a variety of therapeutic approaches. They also engage in teaching, research, consultation and community education. _Educational_ psychologists, in all countries surveyed, provide a broad range of psychological services to school children, their parents and adult learners, including psychoeducational assessment and diagnosis, counselling and consultation.

Generally, they deal with psychoeducational, emotional and behavioural problems that affect learning. They may also conduct research.

Psychologists perform similar roles and work in similar settings throughout the countries surveyed, although private practice is relatively more common in North America. In Hong Kong, most clinical psychologists work in government and subvented hospitals, clinics, social welfare organizations, disciplinary settings and tertiary institutions. Educational psychologists are mainly employed by the Education Department or non-government organizations.
Psychologists generally provide services and use techniques according to their training and/or experience, although this principle is more strictly a requirement in the United States than in other countries.

Education and Training

Generally in the countries surveyed, 3 or 4 years of undergraduate education for a Bachelor degree with Honours or a major in psychology is followed by several years of postgraduate education and supervised experience.

In Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand the postgraduate training for clinical psychologists is commonly a Master's degree, requiring satisfactory performance in examinations, supervised placements and a research dissertation. In the United Kingdom, however, postgraduate clinical programs are changing to a 3 year format, for which some universities are now awarding the degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology. Educational psychologists in these countries require teachers' certification and/or experience prior to a Master's degree. British Chartered Psychologists have completed 3 years of approved postgraduate education and supervised practice.

In Hong Kong, the government continues to employ a small number of people as psychologists who do not meet the specific training and practice requirements recommended by the local professional body. However, the Clinical Division of the Hong Kong Psychological Society is currently providing additional training and supervision for individuals who wish to meet these criteria. Post-professional training in various branches of psychotherapy or research is becoming popular in many countries. An increasing number of practitioners obtain the degree of Ph.D. upon completion of an advanced thesis of research.

In the United States and, to a large extent, Canada, doctoral level training is required for psychologists in independent practice, particularly in the case of clinical and counselling psychologists. Educational psychologists may have a Master's degree in an appropriate subject and approved experience.

Regulation

In Hong Kong and the United Kingdom there are no laws regulating the practice of psychology. However, the Hong Kong Psychological Society and the British Psychological Society, respectively, maintain registers of qualified members, who are bound by a code of conduct listing professional and ethical standards for members. A Practising Certificate is issued annually to Registrants by the British Psychological Society, which also approves all training programs for psychologists. It must be noted that, although a substantial proportion of psychologists belong to these organizations, not all qualified psychologists are members. In Hong Kong, a considerable number of practising psychologists are also Chartered.

In Australia and New Zealand, psychologists are required to be registered in order to practise. Registration in Australia is a state responsibility and approval of training by the Australian Psychological Society is necessary. In New Zealand, a Register of Psychologists is kept by a government appointed board and an Annual Practice Certificate is required for a government position.

In Canada registration, licensing or certification for the independent practice of psychology is the responsibility of the province or territory and is administered by regulatory boards or provincial associations. Some universities work together with the American Psychological Society for accreditation of programs and credential review. In the United States, a license is awarded after completion of all educational and training requirements, a period of supervised experience.
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and after passing a national licensing and a state board examination. Continuing education is required in some states for license renewal. Laws and regulations are published in each state for the practice of psychology and regulation of titles. The American Psychological Society accredits doctoral programs in psychology.

Social Workers

Definition

Social workers in the field of mental health are variously titled social worker, psychiatric social worker or clinical social worker. In the United States clinical social workers are defined as licensed, Master prepared practitioners who are qualified to apply social work principles and methods of a non-medical nature to individuals, groups or organizations with a view to achieving better social adjustment (Table 2). While no legal or standardized definition for social worker was found for Hong Kong, the United Kingdom or Canada, social workers in these countries are also generally regarded in this way.

In Australia, social workers are defined as assisting individuals and groups in identifying needs and problems in their relationships and life circumstances, discovering options for effective coping, decision making and responsible action. Although no legal or standardized definition was found for New Zealand, it is widely regarded to be similar to Australia.

Role

Social workers in the mental health field in all countries surveyed generally provide specific services to individuals, families, groups and organizations in which their knowledge of social resources is used in order to help clients achieve better adjustment. Specifically, they provide referral, information and social services, as well as counselling and psychotherapy. They assist communities in the organization of social or health services and may conduct research.

In Hong Kong most social workers are employed by non-government organizations and the remainder by the government. As in the other countries surveyed, they are concerned with a wide range of client populations, from families with mentally handicapped children to the elderly.

Education and Training

In most countries surveyed social workers complete a 3 or 4 year Bachelor degree or its equivalent. In Hong Kong, the United Kingdom and New Zealand candidates may also qualify by means of a diploma or supervised work experience. A Master's degree is optional in all countries except the United States, where it is a requirement. Training typically involves knowledge of theory combined with experience, although requirements for supervised practice vary. Specialization in mental health is frequently pursued at a postgraduate level. Doctoral programmes in social work are available in the United States.

In Hong Kong there are two undergraduate programs which include theory, field work and supervised practice, leading to a Bachelor degree or a diploma (which can be upgraded to a Bachelor degree). Postgraduate programs also combine course work and supervised experience leading to a Master's degree.

Regulation

The survey indicates that licensing of social workers is practised only in the USA, although it is under consideration in Canada, where

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voluntary registration in each province currently provides a way of dealing with client complaints.

The Hong Kong Association of Social Workers regulates the practice of its members in the Territory, whose conduct is subject to the Association's Code of Ethics. Membership requires educational and training qualifications, as well as employment in an appropriate agency. In the United Kingdom and Australia, the national associations of social workers assume some regulatory responsibility. However, no agency regulating practice could be located for New Zealand.

Counsellors

Definition

In none of the countries surveyed could a legal or standardized definition of the term 'counsellor' be found and there were no laws regulating its use (Table 3). However, counsellors are generally thought of as individuals who have not obtained a degree in one of the usual mental health professions, although they may have a qualification in a related field. They also tend to assume a wide variety of roles, for which there is no standardization.

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HONG KONG</td>
<td>No legal or standardized definition. Generally regarded as someone without usual mental health qualification.</td>
<td>Most work in private organizations, agencies.</td>
<td>No standardized education/training requirements. Some have Bach but not generally mental health field. Most trained in organization.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITED KINGDOM</td>
<td>As in Hong Kong.</td>
<td>As in Hong Kong.</td>
<td>No standardized education/training requirements. BAC accred. members have 3 yrs. supervised training/practice (or equiv.). Some postgrad. programs.</td>
<td>BAC accredits qualified members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>As in Hong Kong.</td>
<td>Most work in gov. agencies.</td>
<td>Some have Bach. (Psych/any). Some postgrad. &amp; specialized programs.</td>
<td>State counselling associations provide ethics code &amp; guidelines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW ZEALAND</td>
<td>As in Hong Kong.</td>
<td>As in Australia.</td>
<td>As in Australia.</td>
<td>No information found.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANADA</td>
<td>As in Hong Kong.</td>
<td>As in Hong Kong.</td>
<td>No information about standardized education/training requirements.</td>
<td>No information found.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITED STATES</td>
<td>As in Hong Kong.</td>
<td>As in Hong Kong.</td>
<td>No standardized education/training requirements. Many postgrad. programs. MFCC has Bach AND Master/Doctorate from accred. program AND 2 yr. supervision.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: BAC British Association of Counselling
       MFCC Marriage, Family & Child Counsellor

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Role

Counsellors generally engage in a wide variety of activities aimed at helping people with their psychological and emotional problems. Many work in private organizations and agencies. In Australia and New Zealand, most are employed in government settings and are trained to provide help to families and couples.

Education and Training

None of the countries surveyed had any standardized education or training requirements and the background of counsellors varied considerably. Some countries offer graduate degrees or specialized programs in areas such as guidance counselling or marriage and family counselling. In the United Kingdom, if a counsellor wishes to become an accredited member of the British Association of Counselling, she/he must complete 900 hours of training and supervised practice over a minimum 3 year period, or its equivalent.

Regulation

Generally speaking, the activities of counsellors, in all countries surveyed, are subject to the least regulation. Hong Kong, Canada and the United States have no regulatory agencies for counsellors, although many states in the United States are certifying Mental Health Workers after completion of a specific training program. In the United Kingdom, the British Association of Counselling provides accreditation for its members. In Australia, all states have local counselling associations with a code of ethics and guidelines for practice. No information could be found for New Zealand.

The Marriage, Family and Child Counsellor (MFCC) is a US licensed Master or Doctoral prepared mental health practitioner whose practice focuses on marriage and family adjustments. An MFCC is qualified to apply counselling principles and a variety of therapeutic methods to individuals, couples or groups. They are regulated by the State Boards of Behavioural Sciences.

Discussion

With the growing acknowledgement of mental health problems and needs in general practice populations, and the prevailing emphasis on primary prevention, attention increasingly falls on the role of the general practitioner in providing and mediating appropriate services. While the general practitioner is in the best position to assess the need for referral to a non-medical mental health practitioner, once that decision is made, the question of making the best referral is one that requires care and consideration. A complicating factor in making such a decision may be uncertainty about the qualifications and experience of mental health providers, what services may be expected and how quality can be assured.

In examining the results of the survey it is clear that mental health practitioners in Hong Kong have a wider variety of training, qualifications and professional backgrounds, which contrasts markedly with the more predictable characteristics of psychiatrists, to whom referrals are commonly made. Education and training requirements are particularly variable, both between professional groups and across the countries surveyed. While no direct comparison of university and professional qualifications is possible between countries, educational criteria for practice range from non-graduate diplomas to doctoral degrees. Psychologists, in all countries studied, are subject to the most lengthy training while counsellors, generally, have the fewest educational requirements.

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Regulation of mental health professionals is also found to vary considerably. Psychologists are regulated in all countries surveyed although, in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom, regulation is voluntary rather than statutory. Social workers are subject to voluntary regulation in most countries, except the United States, where licensing is mandatory. Counsellors, with the exception of Marriage, Family and Child Counsellors, are the least regulated group of practitioners, as well as being the most diverse in terms of training, background and practice.

With reference to the roles performed, a considerable degree of homogeneity is observed within professional groups across countries. Some geographical variation is evident in the extent of involvement in private practice, which is considerably more common in North America.

The private practice sector in Hong Kong gives cause for particular concern. The lack of statutory regulation of mental health titles, such as psychologist, psychotherapist, therapist and counsellor, and of services provided can lead to misrepresentation and abuse by those who are unqualified or insufficiently qualified to practise. Of course, even among qualified practitioners, there is no guarantee of competence or ethical practice, or indeed of satisfaction with the outcome. In light of this, the fact that many qualified practitioners are not bound by ethical requirements or subject to professional disciplinary procedures in the event of misdemeanour is a serious matter. This is particularly important because of the limited legal protection afforded the clients and patients of non-medical mental health practitioners in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

The information gathered in this survey supports the need to develop more comprehensive regulations to govern the qualifications and conduct of non-medical mental health professionals in Hong Kong. Such regulations would serve to promote accurate professional title identification, avoid misinterpretation of qualifications, prevent improper advertising, discourage practitioners from functioning outside their field of competence, as established by their training, education and experience and ultimately serve to protect the Hong Kong public.

References