

15/09/2021

Re: Mental Health Social Work: Lead Role in Family Focused Interventions. Supporting families in exploring the impact of mental illness on whole family.

Mary Butler,
Minister of State
Dept. of Health with responsibility for Mental Health & Older People
Leinster House
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Dear Minister Butler

We write to you as the Chair of the Irish Association of Social Workers and the Chair of the IASW Special Interest Group (SIG) Social Workers in Adult Mental Health (SWAMH). The Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) is the professional body representing social workers in the Republic of Ireland. There are over 4,800 registered social workers in Ireland. This includes staff working in the Health & Social Care sector, in education and training, in the voluntary sector and several independent practitioners.

In February 2020, the IASW published a position statement outlining that social workers are best placed to be lead practitioners in family focused practice in mental health settings. Family Focused Practice (FFP) is the provision of psycho-social supports to the family as a unit. This may be through working directly with the person with mental illness and/or with the children, partner, or other family members (Foster et al, 2012). Mental health social workers are well placed to deliver such interventions, as we are systemically focused and acutely aware of risk factors highlighted within research literature. Empirical evidence highlights that children of parents with a mental illness are at elevated risk for a range of adverse outcomes including infant mortality, developmental delay, attachment problems, neglect, medical illness, mental health difficulties and impaired educational and occupational prospects (Hosman et al, 2009; Weissman et al 2006; England and Sim, 2009). In 2015, Wilson et al, an Irish study, focused on the experience of 159 carers, highlighted that family members can be frustrated by the lack of communication from mental health services. This study highlights that family carers are seeking greater information about their loved one's care and treatment.

In 2018, the national mental health division agreed to fund a national research project to evaluate interventions to families where parents are suffering from a mental illness. With this funding the Centre for Mental Health Research at Maynooth University established the PRIMERA research project (Promoting Research and Innovation in Mental Health Services for Families) (CMHCR, 2018). Thirteen service areas were accepted as research sites for the Project. The majority of the sites are evaluating Family Talk.

The IASW would like to update you regarding the progress of Family Talk. Family Talk is a manualised, 7-session, strengths based, psycho-educational, whole family approach designed to enhance family communication and understanding of parental mental illness, improve family interpersonal relationships, and promote child resilience and utilisation of social supports (Christansen et al, 2015). It facilitates family members in talking about their worries and fears, and how best to harness the family's strengths and build resilience.

PRIMERA's study is one of the few Randomised Control Trials of Family Talk worldwide and the first of its kind in Ireland – where it is a key component of the first systematic national drive to develop and implement FFP for Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) in an Irish context. The other key strengths of this study is its involvement of parents, partners, children, and service providers as participant informant – and an economic analysis of the costs of implementation. The inclusion of partners is particularly important as previous studies suggest they often feel unsupported by mental health services with regard to the care and support they provide, and their desire to be more involvement in the treatment of their loved one (Afelizus et al, 2018). The evaluation of the implementation process will provide important insights into the barriers and enablers of successful service implementation and positive and negative outcomes for participating families. PRIMERA's findings are due to be published in autumn 2021.

We look forward to working with you and your department towards the positive progression of family focused practice within mental health services over the coming months and years.

We would welcome a meeting with you to discuss how family focused interventions could be promoted and supported to become embedded within mental health services. Our contact details are below.

Yours Sincerely



Vivian Geiran
Chairperson IASW



Linda Curran
Chair IASW, SWAMH SIG