



The CENTER for CASE MANAGEMENT

## The Essential Role of Social Work in Health Care

### What we learned from Ida Cannon

By Bonnie Geld, MSW, Matt Boettcher, MSW, LMSW, Shawna Kates, MSW, MBA, Laurie Signorelli, DBH, MAQ, MSW

"The medical social worker seeks to remove those obstacles, either in the patients surrounds or in their mental attitude that interfere with successful treatment, thus freeing the patient to aid in his/her recovery as a whole person." Ida Cannon 1923

Ida Cannon developed the first social work department in the United States at Massachusetts General Hospital. Convinced that medical practice could not be effective without creating the link between illness and the social conditions of the patient, she was ultimately responsible for creating the field of medical social work.

Its worthy of noting that this pandemic has reignited the urgent need to address basic needs like food insecurities, housing issues, utilities emergencies and access to healthcare. Additionally, COVID 19 has exacerbated the need for mental health interventions due to the devastating effect of quarantine, isolation, job loss, and lack of social contacts in general. As Ida Cannon noted, to address overall health, we must approach our work with individual's as a "whole person" and address their needs in an interconnected manner.

From the days of Ida Cannon, Social Work has evolved and is valued as a discipline that takes into account each person's vision for themselves in all areas of life, and provides advocacy, support and resources they need to empower health and wellness. In the view of social work, it is a strength-based approach that focuses on helping a person achieve their independence (in whatever form that is).

#### Back to Basics

Social Work's "essential" role is grounded in a keen understanding of the social disparities that influence clinical and social outcomes. Woven in this understanding is Social Work's awareness of the impact of institutional racism and the disproportionate access to both care and treatment that is a limiting factor in the ability of at-risk populations to confront the serious effects of this Covid 19 pandemic. From facilitating simple connections between individuals and resources, to deeply understanding the overall drivers behind these needs, Social Work must assume a pivotal role in emotional health and wellness.

Social Workers, both personally and professionally, individually and systemically, unite with their clients and erase barriers. Here in this pandemic it is the front line social worker—facing limited and inequitable health systems, trying to creatively and resourcefully support patient's challenges and culturally influenced at-risk health factors. Many of these populations have become marginalized *because of the pandemic* or may have become more exaggerated due to Corvid's devastation. These negative results have manifested in challenges to basic needs such as job and loss of income, medication loss, homelessness and food insufficiency. And in keeping with the whole person approach, Social Workers are also identifying opportunities to support individuals and families effected by mental and emotional health issues such as domestic violence and increasing incidences of depression as a result of continued isolation and quarantine. These are not the times for fancy social advancement

programs—these are the times for grassroots food donations, grants for electrical bill for patients with nebulizers at home, community investments in clean water and transportation. The demand for Social Work to be available, invested, present, and selfless is intrinsically understood.

### The Whole Person

Ida Cannon's work embodied the phrases, "start where the patient is at" or "the person in the situation" and worked to integrate these ideas into the medical environment in partnership between social workers and physicians. It starts with some aspects for social work that are taken for granted today, but was a new concept for Ms. Cannon and her ground breaking work at Massachusetts General. It is not "the hip in room 14" but instead the 72-year-old female who lives alone, has a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade education, does not drive, is involved in her local church but few friends otherwise, a history of isolation and depression, but does have financial resources due to an inheritance from her grandfather, etc. We have "her story" now and able to plan interventions to strengthen and empower her for a successful recovery and health care journey.

The social worker, in today's narrowly specialized health care world, may be the one discipline who deeply knows the patient story, does a complete psychosocial assessment, and can raise issues that might affect the success of all medical and/or surgical interventions at the hospital by understanding the person's situation.

In the last several decades, medicine and in particular hospitals, have gotten increasingly specialized, narrowly focused, and disease/DRG specific in regards to their approach to patient care planning. It is not just that an individual, with all their complexities, are reduced to "the hip in room 14" but that healthcare has built a structure to ensure that type of thinking. For example, we now have electronic medical records (EMR) that standardizes each assessment with check boxes that once completed, makes each patient look the same as every other patient.

If Ida Cannon were alive today, she likely would not only recognize the importance of social work sticking true to its core mission of assessing the whole person but also identify ways to make sure it consistently happens. The more that our world changes, the more social work has to maintain its role in order to have the health care system performs as it needs to in order to meet the patient's total needs. While looking at the whole person is always important, it is especially poignant during Social Work month and as a legacy to the ground breaking work of Ida Cannon.

### Emotional Health & Wellness

The role of Social Work in promoting the emotional and mental health of communities and individuals cannot be understated. Consider the link between foods, housing, and lack of personal safety have in increasing the risk of mental health issues (Jones, 2017 and Taylor, 2018). Social Workers, in their roles in community organizations, (governmental and non-governmental entities), health, mental health, and substance use and recovery arenas, play an increasingly important role in providing the holistic, whole person centered biopsychosocial assessment that is the cornerstone of understanding a person's needs. Using this holistic evaluation as a springboard for engaging the individual in setting goals and in creating a treatment plan is the first

step for many in achieving emotional health. Social Workers also play a role as advocates for equality and the rights of at-risk populations that experience discrimination, harassment, and violence, such as LGBTQ, minority or immigrant populations. There can be significant mental distress as well as physical challenges for these individuals. Social Workers advocate through education and self-empowerment.

Social Workers are essential in promoting mental health and well-being by following the dictates of Ida Cannon, using a whole person approach, and eradicating barriers to optimal health, quality of life and emotional well-being.

### Summary

If Ida Cannon were alive today, she likely would not only recognize the importance of social work sticking true to its core mission of assessing the whole person; but also figure out ways to make sure it consistently happens. In some ways, the more that things have changed, the more social work has to maintain its role in order to help the health care system perform as it needs to in order to meet the patient's total needs. While looking at the whole person is always important, it is especially poignant during Social Work month and as a legacy to the ground breaking work of Ida Cannon.