Social Work – Looking inwards, looking outwards

A report by Andrea Dechamps on the EAPC Pre-Conference Workshop held in Prague on 30 May 2013

There was talk of elephants and sheepdogs.

One thing is certain. When a group of social workers get together things are never dull. And almost invariably, at some stage in the proceedings, they will end up sitting in circles, listening and talking. These are some of the things social workers are good at – conversation, relationship, creating and understanding meaning through shared narratives.

This year’s pre-conference workshop on social work was jointly chaired by David Oliviere, Director of Education at St Christopher’s Hospice, and Pam Firth, Independent Social Work Consultant and Honorary Lecturer at Lancaster University, both of course very familiar faces on the EAPC conference circuit. Whilst the top table was thus dominated by the UK the audience in contrast was very mixed. There were social workers from several European countries and as far as Singapore and Australia, as well as a significant number of nursing and medical colleagues.

Introducing the theme of the workshop, ‘Looking inwards, looking outwards’ David Oliviere reminded the audience to look at the profession with a critical eye, as well as focus outwards on external developments. What followed was a lively mix of presentations from a veteran social worker and intrepid campaigner for palliative care social work, a hospice chief executive still firmly in touch with her social work roots, a physician “twelve years in the business before I even met a social worker” and finally the first professor in social work and palliative care in Europe.

Pam Firth’s presentation helpfully set the scene by tracing the history of social workers’ involvement with the EAPC, mentioning names such as Frances Sheldon, Barbara Monroe and Grace Christ. For the past 12 years there had been an open meeting of social workers at each congress, with numbers gradually increasing, and a key meeting in 2005 in Aachen signaling the start of the European social work movement. Pam reminded the audience of the importance of the social care perspective. Possibly preaching to the converted? As one nurse from Croatia in the audience stated categorically later on, care for patients in her experience is never as good as when working jointly with a social worker. Knowing the importance of the social care perspective from our day-to-day experience of multidisciplinary working needs to be underpinned by a greater body of social work research, Pam stressed. Keep the abstracts coming…

Pam picked out a number of current challenges for social workers across Europe. Alongside budget cuts, decentralization in Central and Eastern Europe and the ageing population, she pointed her finger at social workers’ role confusion. We are still, so she said, confused about what it is we do and how we work alongside other professions. She underlined the importance of developing our identity across borders. Food for thought.

The EAPC Social Work Task Force has focused since early 2009 on bringing some clarity to the diversity of roles, tasks and education of palliative care social workers in Europe. Pam reported on task force activities, including a consultation paper currently undergoing final revisions before submission to the EAPC board. This paper recommends the adoption of competencies, as researched and validated by the Canadian Palliative Care Social Workers.

Dame Barbara Monroe, chief executive of St Christopher’s Hospice in London, followed in her usual inimitable and at times provocative style. She came straight to the point. Given current changes in demographics and disease, worldwide recession and unprecedented change in systems, current approaches to delivery of care, she stressed, were insufficient. New models of care less demanding of resource, good enough and replicable at scale were needed. With current models based on past assumptions and only crude understanding of preferences what was social work’s role in providing evidence?
In view of the scale of the challenge, Barbara suggested the focus needed to be not so much on improving access to palliative care but rather on improving wider systems of health and social care. Dying could not be got ‘right’ within and by hospice and palliative care services alone. And again – what role was social work playing in the future of end of life care delivery?

What should not change? Barbara quoted Malcolm Payne – palliative care social workers’ “willingness to intervene in social relationships – have a go at sorting things out – not give up on people because they don’t fit bureaucratic categories” (Payne, World conference 2012).

And how should social workers engage with the future? As anticipated, Barbara had plenty to say. She suggested social workers, alongside other end of life care professionals, needed to develop creativity, enterprise and entrepreneurial skills. They needed to move beyond individual advocacy to organisational engagement, contribute to system level change with an ever swifter idea to implementation timeframe. They needed to become political. She called on the audience to deliver with absolute clarity about what it is social workers can do and why it is important. Of course this resonated with what Pam Firth had already spoken about. Barbara’s final poignant words were about finding our voice and seeking leadership roles. Had any of us expected to be let off lightly?

Questions from the floor focused on research and the difficulties of engaging those families not so articulate or feeling they had no stake in society. Barbara agreed that many studies were indeed centred on biased populations. She suggested one might explore using volunteers who could play a significant role in involving such families in research. Susan Cadell from Canada added that a whole range of innovative methodologies were needed to ensure broader representation, including online options and, for example, giving participants some kind of monetary incentive or payment to offset costs such as childcare. Ethics boards, Susan reckoned, were warning us that people might be too fragile to participate in research. She proposed a different stance. We knew how much our clients wanted to tell their stories, she said, and we needed to follow through.

Next on the platform was Dr Tony O’Brien from Marymount University Hospice and Cork University Hospital offering a thoughtful reflection and outsider’s perspective on the social work role and on shared ground between the professions.

The first palliative care social worker Tony met was Elisabeth Earnshaw-Smith at St Christopher’s Hospice London, one of the early pioneers. Tony highlighted her innate capacity to name the unspeakable (or elephant in the room). He remembered learning a great deal about the human condition from Elisabeth.

Tony spoke about narrative whole person care and offered some poignant quotes. “For all the science that underpins clinical practice, practitioners and patients make sense of the world by stories” (Elwyn & Gwyn, 1999). And: “Who we are as persons determines the quality of our relationships, and the quality of care we offer” (Kearney 2005). Palliative care social workers of course know about the value of story and bring ourselves to meet the patient as a person. Tony acknowledged repeatedly how much he had learned in this respect from social workers. He shared a particular patient’s story (Sweeney K. BMJ, 2009), a harrowing account of fear of anonymity and isolation. Had this patient met a social worker who would have enquired into the person’s “this is who I am”? Tony suspected not. Our patients and families need to tell their story – Susan Cadell had already referred to this earlier, in the context of research.

Tony offered a diagrammatic representation of key components of the social work role as he saw it: to humanise, contextualise, normalise, empathise. Is this how we saw our role? And he spoke in no uncertain terms about social work needing to find its voice. He suggested palliative care social work had “singularly failed” to describe what it does and measure its value.

The final speaker was Prof Dr Maria Wasner from the Catholic University for Applied Sciences Munich, giving an academic perspective. Her focus was on the potential of social work within the inter-disciplinary team. She told a tale of five blind people describing an elephant (yes, here we had
another elephant) each picking on one particular trait of the elephant. The social worker, she reckoned, would be the sixth blind person orbiting the animal to see how big it was, finding out whether other elephants were nearby, checking out the environment, in other words exploring the elephant in context, from a systemic perspective. To obtain a rounded assessment of patients and their families all six blind people, Maria suggested, were crucial.

Maria spoke about the social worker as the “specialised all-rounder” in the inter-disciplinary team, able to contribute specific social work skills such as their understanding of group processes, conflict resolution and the ability to tolerate difference. She pointed to the close match between social work core competencies and the competencies needed for collaborative team working. In describing the social work role within the team Maria pointed to overlapping responsibilities as well as distinct areas of social work expertise. She emphasised the close link between the contribution of social workers as “context interpreters” and more holistic care planning. And that for effective inter-disciplinary team working, social workers needed to be core team members.

In conclusion, Maria spoke again about the need for a culture shift amongst social workers. We had heard it before from the other speakers. We needed to step into leadership roles, we needed more research into the effectiveness of social work interventions.

Time to move into circles and for some small group discussion. With much to think about from the presentations this was our opportunity to focus very specifically on particular challenges for social work in our individual countries. Some new issues came up: poor career pathways for social workers, funding and regulation issues, the massive impact of changing family structures, the impact of survivorship. And, again and again, resource issues, both in relation to resources available to support patients and families and resources to fund social work posts.

Later, during final questions, Barbara would pick up again on the resource issue. In times of limited resources as well as increased scrutiny we needed to find a way of supporting professionals to take risks she said. Social workers had particular skills in managing and containing risk she suggested. They needed to have honest and transparent conversations with patients and families about limited resources available and risks involved. And they needed to let families take risks at the end of their lives.

Now for the fun and slightly wacky bit of the afternoon. Each circle was asked to come up with a symbol for social workers. Paper and coloured pens were handed out. Again, much talk. My personal favourite, although of course it was a strictly non-competitive exercise, was the group choosing a sheepdog as their image (you get it?) even though they could not quite grasp who or what the shepherd would stand for. Maybe that was where the analogy ended? We were shown the sheepdog on a tablet, quickly downloaded from the net. (Not following the instructions to use pen and paper – now what does that say about social workers?!) Then there were images of a candle, a necklace, a piece of a puzzle and a rather more complicated image involving arrows and mirrors, travelling along a road and containment...

Inger Benkel from Sweden had the penultimate word of the afternoon pulling together themes. Again: “We must explain better what we are doing. People who have resources must be able to see what we are doing.”

Finally, drawing the afternoon to a close Pam Firth gave a special mention and thanks to David Oliviere for skillfully co-facilitating the event and, most importantly, for his tireless efforts on behalf of the EAPC Social Work Task Force in his role as co-chair. She announced that David would be retiring from St Christopher’s later in the year and therefore standing down from the task force. His contribution will be enormously missed.

The final take home message from both David and Pam to all the social workers in the audience was “share your knowledge.”

An edited version of this report is also published on the EAPC blog at www.eapcnet.wordpress.com