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9.5

PREPARING CLIENT RECORDS

Purpose: To maintain accurate and useable client records.

Discussion: What and how much information should be included in the client's record? How should this information be arranged and organized? Every social worker and agency must come up with workable answers to those questions. What is recorded and the

format used will depend on factors such as the agency's mission, the type of service provided, relevant state and federal laws and regulations, and who will have access to the records.

A client record describes the client and his or her problem or situation and the social work intervention. It shows the rationale underlying the intervention, documents the client's involvement in decision making and actions taken, documents compliance with key agency policies, and provides a coherent picture of the specific services provided. All client records contain identifying data such as names, addresses, and phone numbers. A "good record," according to Kagle (2002, 30), will be accurate, unbiased, objective, up-to-date, well written, and well organized. Given that a court can subpoena client records for use as evidence in lawsuits and because a social worker may be asked to read aloud from this record in open court, a worker must be very thoughtful about what information is placed in a record and how it is stated (see Item 16.7). Kagle (2002, 30) also notes that certain types of information should not be placed in a client record, such as information not relevant to the services provided, unsubstantiated hypotheses, unfounded judgments, and rumors about the client. Maintaining client confidentiality is an overriding concern in all recordkeeping and documentation (see Item 10.5).

Depending on agency policy, a client record may be handwritten, dictated, or typed directly into a computer document. Increasingly, agencies use software programs that aid in the preparation and the management of client records and make the retrieval of information faster and easier (see Item 9.4).

The use of *progress notes* or *case notes* is a common method of recording in direct service agencies. This approach describes the worker's contacts with the client, chronologically arranged. After each contact with the client or with persons collateral to client service, the worker writes a few sentences or paragraphs (progress notes), which succinctly captures the essence of what happened during the session and, typically, states what the worker plans to do in future sessions with the client.

In order to prepare progress notes for easier reading and retrieval, the notes are often placed within an organizing structure. The DAP (Data, Assessment, Plan), PIG (Problem, Intervention, Goal), and SOAP formats are three such structures. The acronym SOAP refers to the following key elements or headings:

- S *Subjective information* describes how the client feels about or perceives his or her situation. It is derived from client self-report. By definition, subjective information does not lend itself to independent or external validation.
- O *Objective information* is that which has been obtained by way of direct observation by professionals, clinical examinations, systematic data collection, and the like. This category of information can be independently verified.
- A *Assessment* refers to the professional's conceptualization or conclusions derived from reviewing the subjective and objective information.
- P The *Plan* spells out how the professional intends to address or resolve the client's concern or problem.

FIGURE 9.2

Sample SOAP Entry

Subjective: Mrs. Brown states she worries about children's diet. The children complain of being hungry and to her embarrassment they have asked neighbors for food. Since Mrs. B grew up on welfare, she has vowed "never to go on the dole." She says she is in a "panic" about the thought of losing her children.

Objective: Her job earns \$325 take-home pay per week. Rent is \$700 per month. It is hard to follow Mrs. Brown in conversation; she jumps from topic to topic. Agency records indicate that she was herself neglected as a child and placed in foster care for two years.

Assessment: Family does not have enough money for food. Mrs. Brown is probably eligible for food stamps. Much of her disorganization is due to her anxiety about losing her children to foster care, which is, in turn, related to her own experience in foster care. She fears that accepting welfare will label her as a "bad parent."

Plan: (Problem #2) Need to support Mrs. Brown's application for food stamps and show her that application is a way to be a "good mother" under these very trying circumstances. Need to assure her that agency has no plans to place her children. Begin effort to help Mrs. B find higher-paying job. Complete food stamp application by 5/25.

Figure 9.2 is an illustrative SOAP entry related to problems faced by a client, Mrs. Brown.

The shorter DAP and PIG formats collapse both the "subjective" and the "objective" information into a single category.

At monthly or quarterly intervals, the information contained in progress notes or case notes may be consolidated into a *narrative summary* and also may be used to update or modify a client's service contract or treatment plan (see Item 12.6).

Many agencies utilize various *forms and outlines* to collect and arrange client information. Such instruments are created by the agency's professional staff and administrators familiar with the work of the agency and the type of concerns it addresses. The headings written into the forms and outlines remind the social worker of the types of data to be recorded and also facilitate the retrieval of information. Examples of headings that appear on such forms are: client's presenting concern or problem, client's family and social supports, client's health, client's employment and occupation, client's cultural background, activities and changes since last contact with client, and so on.

A consideration in all approaches to preparing client records is developing a mode of documentation that can monitor and measure client progress in order to determine if a given intervention is working. The starting point for all such measurement is clarity regarding the intervention goals and objectives (see Items 12.1 and 12.5). Chapter 14 describes scales and techniques used to measure client change. The documentation of client change is critically important when a client is using a public or private insurance to pay for the service. Several books offer guidance on the preparation of a client record that will meet requirements imposed by managed care. Such books list hundreds of prewritten progress notes that are keyed to various client problems and to the DSM categories (see Item 11.18 and Item 16.8).

9.1 REPORT WRITING

Purpose: To prepare a clear and useful professional report.

Discussion: A social worker must write many reports. Reports that are inaccurate, incomplete, or unclear create misunderstanding and sometimes costly errors. A number of guidelines can improve the quality of reports.

1. Before you begin to write, carefully consider the report's audience (i.e., who will be reading this report?). Determine what information or content the readers need and expect. Also, consider whether the report may be passed on to still other readers such as another agency or possibly to newspapers or agency clients. Keep these potential readers in mind as you write and imagine how they will interpret or perhaps misinterpret your words.

Select an appropriate format and writing style. As a general rule, a formal writing style and format that yields a tightly organized report is required for court reports and interagency or external communication. A less formal approach is usually acceptable for internal communications (i.e., within an agency or organization). Formal reports require close attention to agency protocol and prescribed format, use of proper names and titles, and accurate use of terminology. By contrast, the use of first names, abbreviations, and jargon may be acceptable for internal or intraagency communication. Copies of sample agency reports—ones judged by others in the agency to be good models—can be used as guides to your report writing.

2. Before writing the first draft, organize the content to be presented into a logical structure that outlines the main topics, the various subtopics, and the key points under each. If you present your ideas in an orderly manner and use various headings to set sections apart, the reader will be better able to follow your reasoning and understand your message.

Two or three drafts or revisions of a formal report may be needed before the final version is produced. Ask peers to review your draft. If they are not sure of what you are trying to say, you can be certain that the intended reader will not understand either. Also read the draft aloud; if it does not sound right, revise it. Be committed to your ideas, not your words.

Always use the spelling check, grammar check, and the thesaurus that are features of a computer's word-processing program. A thesaurus, which lists synonyms and antonyms for a word, will help you add variety and freshness to word selection.

3. Use words, sentences, and writing style that are simple, clear, and direct. Select your words carefully, using only those your reader will understand. Use the dictionary whenever in doubt about the exact meaning of a word. Use the number of words necessary, but no more. Wordiness lessens the force of expression and may distract the reader from the point you want to make.

4. Keep your sentences short, usually 15 to 20 words or less. Most often, the straightforward subject-verb-object sentence is the best arrangement because it can be read quickly and is seldom misunderstood. Consider these two sentences:

- After much discussion, not all of which was productive, a foster home placement—the agreed upon arrangement—was made for the child.
- The child was placed in a foster home.

The second sentence is easier to read and understand; it is short and it follows the subject-verb-object structure.

5. Use the active voice whenever possible. The passive voice adds unnecessary words, weakens the statement, and makes the meaning less clear. For example, “Don hit John” has a clearer, stronger impact than “John was hit by Don.”

6. Give special attention to paragraph construction. Each paragraph should focus on a single idea. The outline for a good paragraph is as follows:

- In the first sentence, state the central point of the paragraph.
- If necessary for purposes of clarification, restate the central point in other words.
- Present the evidence, examples, background information, and the logic supporting the central point and your conclusions or observations.
- Finally, draw the paragraph to a close, summarizing the key point in a single sentence.

By reading only the first and last sentence of a paragraph, the reader should be able to pick up the core idea of what you are trying to communicate. In general, a page of double-spaced typewritten copy should contain two or three paragraphs. If there is only one paragraph per page, it is likely that too many ideas have been crammed into a single paragraph.

7. Do not use weak and evasive language such as “There may be a tendency toward,” “It would appear that,” “It seems as though,” and “There is some reason for believing.” Such phrases give the reader the impression that the writer is either unsure of what to say or unwilling to take responsibility for what is being said. Also avoid so-called weasel words such as *feel* and *seems*. Instead of saying “I feel placement is necessary,” be direct and state “I believe placement is necessary” or simply “I recommend placement for this child.” Wishy-washy language and weasel words cause the report reader to question the worker’s professional competence and confidence.

8. Avoid hackneyed expressions such as “It certainly merits study,” “The matter is receiving our closest attention,” “We will explore every avenue,” and “Naturally, the child’s interest is our concern.” Such trite phrases suggest that the writer is insincere or responding as a mere formality.

9. Avoid using slang or phrases that might offend the reader. For example, consider the following series of words: *determined*, *obstinate*, *stubborn*, *pig-headed*. Each has about the same meaning, but each will strike the reader differently. Also, avoid redundant phrases such as *first beginnings*, *the present time*, *join together*, and *exact same*.