

A Question and a Reply

by Phillip W. Weiss

Recently a health care professional asked me (paraphrasing): what was the most satisfying part of my work as a social worker? This question took me by surprise, first, because no one had ever asked me that question, and second, because the health care professional cared enough to ask, which I appreciated.

While the question was straightforward, I could not respond in a likewise manner. That was because first, during my tenure as a social services worker, first as a caseworker for the city of New York and then as a social worker for the VA, US Army and NYC HHC, I interacted with many clients, each one with a unique set of problems; second, the nature of my job required that I interact with people whose lives were in crisis; third, as an employee of large bureaucratic institutions, I performed duties under conditions created by others who set the parameters of my work; and fourth, although I was a health care professional I was also a line worker represented by others in labor-management negotiations. These conditions made immediate job satisfaction an elusive commodity. Indeed, my relationship with the workplace was more in line with that of a factoryworker on a production line. The work culture was geared to producing results, with job satisfaction a possible but not necessarily an inevitable, essential or expected byproduct.

Nonetheless, as a medical social worker, I played a critical role in the delivery of health care services to patients from high-risk populations including the frail elderly, the uninsured, the unemployed, substance abusers, the mentally ill and the homeless. My job also provided me with steady employment, good fringe benefits, and an opportunity to interact on a professional basis with other health care professionals including physicians, nurses, technicians, administrators, and other social workers.

As a medical social worker, my fundamental mission was to advocate for patients who lacked the social support needed to ensure continuity of care after discharge from the hospital. By staying faithful to that mission, I saved lives. This then was perhaps the most satisfactory part of my career, and which may provide a satisfactory answer to question posed to me.

Below are links to other sources relevant to the question.

Sources:

[Discharge Planning Blues - revised.pdf](#)

[UNSUNG HEROES – THE STORY OF THE BELLEVUE HOSPITAL](#)

<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/MEDICAL-SOCIAL-WORKERS%3A-CLINICIANS-OR-CLERKS-Weiss/982f12ac9e375d65263898298f771eadff9d4b3a>