

Interview on the tips to keep case notes up-to-date

Ms Iris Lin	Senior Social Worker/ Fei Yue Community Services
Ms Lim Jim Jim	Senior Manager/ MSF
Ms Long Chey May	Senior Assistant Director/ Jurong Health
Ms Yogeswari Munisamy	Principal Social Worker/ MSF

Edited by

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Watch the video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vlzoLIQL-w&feature=youtu.be>

You have been in the sector for a while. Would you be able to share with us how you managed to keep your case notes updated? What is considered “up-to-date”?

Yoges After every case work or counselling session, I will immediately set aside time to complete my case work notes. This is a practice that I always had since my school based counselling days and it became even more structured after my child protection days in Perth.

I make sure that there is minimal time lapse so that my recording is accurate and captures key issues and assessment. It is often harder to recollect past sessions and the process takes longer. My pre-session plans also go into my case notes.

The same goes for my notes of supervision sessions of my social workers.

Iris I agree with Yoges. I will try to do my case notes immediately after seeing my clients. I find that planning my schedule in advance is very helpful so that I can ensure I have at least 30 min for each case recording.

This is by far the best way, for me, in terms of documentation and casework management so as to make sure documentation is up to date. In the event if I am unable to do them on the same day, I will try to do them the following day and will usually finish it up in the same week. As mentioned, I usually plan my schedule in advance and allow for pockets of time for case notes.

Jim Jim I also do try to make sure there are minimal time laps. I would key in the case notes (into our computerised case management system) before the next meeting with the client so that I am reminded of the follow-up action required, if any, and think through what is the overall goal for the next session.

Chey May In healthcare it is a little different. The patient usually stays for a short period of time, about 5 – 8 days, and very much like doctors, we will write down the case notes on the spot.

There are two types of case notes, one is the written notes (progress notes in the patient’s casefile) and the other one would be the department notes which is being keyed into the computerised case management system within each health cluster. Notes in both places are a little different as MSWs work in a multidisciplinary setting and department notes are viewed by other professionals. There is a challenge to key in the information into the system on time as it is more precise and formatted.

What advice do you have for social workers to keep their case notes updated? Please share with us 3 tips.

- Iris Firstly, I would advise them to plan their schedule in advance. That's when boundaries are set in place.
Secondly, discipline is very crucial. One needs a lot of discipline to do the notes even though it might not be the most enjoyable part of the work.
Thirdly, they must stay focus on the reason why case notes is important and necessary.
- Yoges Agree! Scheduling is key in making sure that time is set aside for case notes. They should make sure they calculate and indicate on their calendar the time needed for their case recording in addition to the session.
- Jim Jim Documentation and understanding its importance in client outcomes and professional accountability helps us be more conscientious about case notes.
Like Iris, I would recommend them to schedule in advance by putting it in their "To Do" list. They should also make time to key in the case notes as part of their weekly schedule. Most importantly, they need to keep their case notes concise.
- Chey May Yes, concise case notes are a must! However, it should include detailed information where necessary. They should write down detailed notes so that it would allow others who read the case notes to understand the case better. This helps when duties are being covered. They also need to be timely in keying in their documents so that the information would still be as accurate as possible. Healthcare professionals also have to follow the JCI (Joint Commissions International) standards (e.g. authorship, date and time of documentation, no use of unrecognized abbreviations, etc.)
- Yoges My view is that they should keep their recordings along main points and headers which apply to all casework practice, local or overseas, and across social service sectors.
- Another tip would be to print out or develop forms with pre-established headings. What's essential is thorough assessment and follow up, not just narratives of what happened in the session. Sometimes, I find it helpful to draw visuals of recurring patterns to provide clarity in my assessment.

As you are aware, many social workers have little time to write case notes. What would you consider as “good enough” case notes?

Chey May In the health care industry, people are very busy and might not have the time to read through long case notes and sometimes, social workers write long stories. My suggestion would be to make their case notes clear, concise, succinct and to the point. Keying in the case notes into the system on time is also very important.

Jim Jim I believe that as long as the main points that transpired in the session and follow-up required is captured in the case notes, it would be suffice. The case notes is “good enough” when the reader is able to assess from the case notes the progress of the case, the significant events, for example warnings given (for probation) and the follow-up required on part of client and worker.

Iris I would think that a good enough case notes covers these main categories "objectives, content, assessment and plan of action"

Yoges Case notes should have key headings as it would help to capture the essentials. It's the standard¹ for most settings but it will vary a little on a couple headings for some.

For new workers, it is important to start with a more extended case note template to help frame thinking.

From your perspective, why are case notes important? And what are the risks and consequences when case notes are not updated?

Jim Jim Case notes are important documentation of the work done. It is necessary for the next worker to take over and see clients due to case transfers or when they are tasked to cover duty for those on leave. They might also be required to make a decision in worker's absence or in unexpected situations such as allegations against worker, for example, for negligence. At times, the file could also be called for during police investigations, like in the event of a client's sudden death or when client or accomplice denies involvement in an offence.

Lack of updated case notes will affect the confidence of the next worker in continuing the work to be done and the confidence of the supervisor of the quality of intervention done. It will also cause unnecessary stress to the worker when information is required at critical points such as when a review is due or

¹ Suggested standard key headings in case notes

1. Goals and objectives/ Focus of session
2. Follow up from last session (if not the first session)
3. Assessment
4. Intervention and service provided
5. Reflections and follow up needed
6. Next session date

when the file is called up due to unforeseen circumstances.

Yoges For child protection work, and cases with risk, omission of critical information can create risk situations for families and social workers. I also recall having to write affidavits and being subpoenaed to court to give evidence and being cross-examined. Case notes are critical to demonstrate professional assessment by the social worker and can even determine child outcomes.

Another reason why case notes are important is for the purpose of advocacy. When I had to write social reports or letters to advocate for access to resources for clients, the assessment in my case notes helped me enhance the quality of my reports and put forth a professional document with clear evidence of needs and gaps and impact on client of not having this resource.

Like what Jim Jim said, case notes also help in good case transfers between workers and between agencies. At the end of the day, it is in the best interest of the client who has walked through our doors.

Iris I think case notes provide up-to-date information and assessment of the client and his or her systems. Case workers can use the case notes to remind themselves of the follow up plans and this can ensure a more targeted and seamless intervention instead of being unfocused throughout the whole intervention process. In cases of emergency when case worker is not around to follow up with their client, it would be helpful for the covering staff to have the up to date documentation. This will avoid any possible repetitions or unnecessary questions which may further agitate the clients at times or cause more time wastage.

Yoges An important part of supervision is also to ensure that case recordings are done and that workers don't accumulate unrealistic numbers of backdated case recordings.

I usually concretise and record my assessment of the case and also reflect on the case and make forward plans.

You can refer to the Social Work Code of Ethics which talks about documentation. [to include a sidebar on relevant code of ethics section]

Chey May My opinion about documentation is that they are important for both communication and follow up. If case notes are not updated, it is very time wasting and thus would result in low service quality and people might complain. This is not a severe risk but it is still a problem. However, for some cases, the risk can be very severe depending on the incident, for example, suicide and family violence.

In hospitals, we have an incidents reporting system but we cannot always rely on it. I think training social workers to know what to write and when to write will be

helpful. It will help to improve the accuracy of case notes recorded. Personally, for new social workers, I would put in place templates² so that there will be a framework which would help to assist them during their work.

In a busy outpatient setting, if you see cases back to back, you might not have the time to finish documenting and would usually stay back late to do these recordings. I believe time management is very important. Risk can be very severe and it can sometimes harm the reputation of the organisation or be damaging to the patients.

I think the pace of work should also be carefully monitored so that social workers are not bombarded with a lot of cases. Increasingly, many institutions are going paperless and MSWs can access and complete their case recordings at home these days.

Sherri L. Morgan and Carolyn Polowy

** Taken from NASW: Social Workers and Clinical Notes (October 2000)*

To prevent adding more stress to the next worker who is taking up the case, it is important to have case notes. In the healthcare sector, clinical notes are used to facilitate the delivery of mental health services, ensure continuity of care, protect clients' privacy, and ensure reasonable future access to client treatment history. Contemporaneous clinical notes are an important part of the client record, as are evaluations, treatment plans, prognoses, collateral contacts, contact dates, and payment plans. Clinical notes often contain the most private client information as well as the therapist's observations, clinical concerns, and relevant anecdotal information. Social workers sometimes hold the view that the obligation to keep such records is a discretionary one. Although discretion is required when determining what to include and how to phrase comments, clinical notes are necessary to create an accurate treatment record and demonstrate commitment to professional practice standards.

NASW Code of Ethics (Extracted)

3.04 Client Records

- (a) Social workers should take reasonable steps to ensure that documentation in records is accurate and reflects the services provided.
- (b) Social workers should include sufficient and timely documentation in records to facilitate the delivery of services and to ensure continuity of services provided to clients in the future.
- (c) Social workers' documentation should protect clients' privacy to the extent that is possible and appropriate and should include only information that is directly relevant to the delivery of services.
- (d) Social workers should store records following the termination of services to ensure reasonable future access. Records should be maintained for the number of years required by state statutes or relevant contracts.

² There is eMSW or FFAST systems adopted by various hospitals where templates and headings guide the MSW on what to document