

Tuning in to the Leaders

In the Profession

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Mrs Palakrishnan is no fresh face in Singapore's social work sector. From her humble beginnings in nursing, her journey into social work from 1969 has amassed into nearly 45 years' worth of keen experience in numerous hospitals around Singapore. She received the Outstanding Social Worker award in 1998 and the Courage medal for 'committed and dedicated service' during the 2003 SARS outbreak.



Timeline of Medical Social Work in Singapore

Early 1960s

- 'Almoners' in hospitals renamed medical social workers (MSW) who were in charge of patients' financial and social problems
- SW education focused on practicum

1960-70s

- Social issues faced by Singapore e.g. Crowded living conditions, poor hygiene, migrant population, malnutrition
- SW more involved with meeting basic needs

Changing Landscape

- Advancements in medicine, better living conditions – rise in patient expectations
- Need for specialized knowledge led to the start of multi-disciplinary teams

Social changes

- Issues e.g. Attempted suicides, domestic abuse emerge and land in hospitals
- MSW spend more time on complex cases

1990-2000s

- Standardization of medical procedures
- Increase in social intervention programs

2003

- SARS 'the silent war'
- An unprecedented crisis: unexpected challenge
- MSW provide psychological support

Her thoughts on the Profession

In a caring profession like social work, knowledge and special skills are inadequate if one does not possess the basic qualities of compassion, empathy, sensitivity, and a sustained real interest of concern for our clients whom we choose to serve.

Social workers need to have the ability to network in all kinds of situations and environments.

Being in this profession presents opportunities for social workers to champion a cause and to be at the forefront in managing the care of patients.

Success is character-dependent: on accepting challenges and finding your niche.

Social workers have to be able to brave through the unexpected.





Her views on Leadership

It is important to choose one who already has an interest in being a leader instead of a reluctant person.

You will be given many roles along your career, and as you take on that role, you will slowly learn the ropes.

A leader needs to know his/her strengths and competency levels, effectively learning through supervisors and mentors.

It is the supervisors' responsibility to nurture the embodiment of values in a new social worker.

The advancement to a leadership position is a step by step approach with slow but steady upward movement. For example, you start as social worker and slowly progress to become the leader of a department and a team.



Your Questions



How do you encourage yourself to continue when things are difficult?

“ There are great challenges and I went through quite a bit. It is a hard road, but if you are convinced you are doing something for the patient and advocating something, in my experience you just have to go on doing it. The secret is just to do it. ”

Are there any times you wanted to quit and how did you manage to convince yourself otherwise? What kept you going?



“ Strangely, I did not. I did question myself why I am still working but I think it's interest in the job and enjoying what I'm doing that keeps me going. Everyday presents a challenge to be solved and that's meaningful. ”



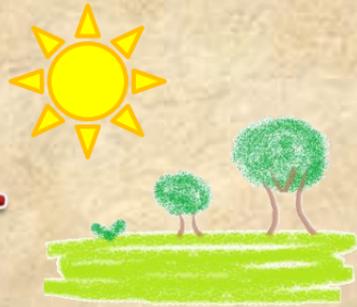
Your Questions



How do you develop good decision-making skills especially for crisis-situations such as the SARS crisis?

“ There needs to be good collaboration and cooperation between organisations/partners to ease the burdens of coping during a crisis. The social work family should come in to help. For example, when the Hotel New World collapsed, Mr Veloo asked the Medical Social Workers to be involved. The social work family should come in from the beginning in order to cultivate a fast response system to cope with limited resources.”

Hopes for the sector...



**More accreditation
and
acknowledgement
for Social Workers**

**Induction for new social
workers and to receive
mentorship from Senior
Social Workers**

**Peer support systems between
Social Workers: to discuss cases
and views with no hierarchy issues
to worry about**

**Attachment programs, integration of sub-sectors
and to bridge distance in the work. (eg. Social Work
in healthcare and community work)**

- More exchanges to understand various roles better**
 - to improve communication to reduce fractured
issue management and handling**
- Bring different sub-sectors together to be able to
move forward together**