

from the field of gerontological social work practice

PRACTICE WITH THE AGING FAMILY: WHO IS THE CLIENT?

As It Was

Professional practice with the aging family has undergone several changes in the past 30 years - changes that reflected cultural attitudes as well as emerging ideas of how best to help. In the 1960s, the interests and autonomy of the individual older person trumped those of the family whose interests were often perceived as competing. The profession woke up to the importance of including family members in the 1970s and 1980s after research revealed that spouses and adult children were the major providers of concrete and emotional support to older adults. By 1990, the interests of the older person often appeared lost in concern for easing the stresses and burdens of her family members. This was especially true in the case of dementia where - for the past fifteen years - the lion's share of clinical, program, and policy initiatives have been focused on offering support to family caregivers.

A Welcome Change

Enter the baby boomers who demand inclusion. And, with the support of forward looking professionals, are finding creative ways to affect a dual emphasis on the individual and her caregivers. Those in the early stages of dementia are finding ways to continue being contributing members of society; adapting former activities to their changing capacities as well as educating audiences to alter public perceptions about their condition. Couples counseling is improving communication within relationships while joint support groups (including people with dementia and those who care for them) are on the rise.

These and other innovative programs, as chronicled in a front-page article in *The New York Times* on March 29, 2007, are applauded by Peter Rabins, co-author of *36-hour Day*, a book that has provided guidance and solace to millions of family members caring for older adults with Alzheimer's Disease. He observed "We've given wide attention to the caregivers and ignored the psychological and relational aspects of the lives of people with the disease...so these are important steps toward redressing this imbalance."

Have We Achieved A Happy Balance?

We have come a long way toward balancing the needs and wants of the older person and those of his family, yet issues remain. Indeed, the work has just begun. Viewing the older adult, regardless of his capabilities, as both a unique individual and as a member of a large number of interlocking networks (family, friendship, community) is an ongoing challenge - as well as developing the skills to reach these many levels of "client".

SBW Partners is a fee-for-service firm devoted to advancing social work practice in aging. Services are provided by Dr. Barbara Silverstone and Dr. Ann Burack-Weiss, the firm's founding partners, and a group of associates. We provide consultation and staff development for agencies, supervision for practitioners and corporate training programs. For more information, please visit www.sbwpartners.com or call 212.337.2555.