

## Book Review

Reamer, F. G. (2015). *Risk management in social work: Preventing professional malpractice, liability, and disciplinary action*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

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Frederic G. Reamer, Ph.D., is a professor of social work at Rhode Island College. He has published extensively in the areas of social work ethics and competent, ethical practice.

The book discusses the many ways social workers may face malpractice suits and/or licensing board charges. It presents both the issues that may lead to charges and the best ways to avoid the risks. The final sentences summarize the issues well. "In the final analysis, however, skillful and ethical practice is the most effective way to prevent and manage risk. This is also the hallmark of a professional" (p. 310).

As Dr. Reamer notes in the preface, relatively few social workers face malpractice charges. It is, however, important for social workers to be cognizant of the risks, and to remind themselves from time to time of the importance of competent, ethical practice.

Chapter 1: "Professional Risk Management: An Overview" provides definitions of malpractice and related terms. It stresses the importance of being knowledgeable of laws, policies and ethics governing practice. It is important to know state laws. The chapter emphasizes the importance of seeking consultation if in doubt.

Chapter 2: "Confidentiality and Privileged Communication," discriminates privacy and confidentiality. Privacy is the right to self-determination through noninterference. Confidentiality is the responsibility to not disclose information gained in serving another. This chapter discusses the

conditions under which confidentiality may not apply. It stresses the importance of consulting with others in cases that may not be clear. It is important to document consultations. The chapter also discusses accidental or inadvertent disclosures and the importance of guarding against these. Finally it stresses the importance of informed consent to release information. It is very important that social workers and agencies develop clear policies regarding confidentiality and communicate these to clients.

Chapter 3: "The Delivery of Services," deals with clients' rights to service, access to records and involvement in service planning. It stresses "informed consent" and the conditions necessary for informed consent. Consent must be obtained without coercion or undue influence. Clients must understand the proposed treatment, alternatives available and their right to refuse and/or withdraw. The chapter also addresses involuntary commitments, dual relationships, boundary issues, and issues related protective services. Of interest and importance, and perhaps new to many social workers, is the discussion on concerns raised by the use of cyberspace in social work. Many issues here are not yet settled.

Chapter 4: "Impaired Social Workers," deals with several problems that may occur for individual social workers and agencies when a social worker is practicing while impaired. Impairment may be due to the use or abuse of chemicals or due to the social worker's life situation. The expectation is that

a social worker will avoid any situation in which a client might be harmed. Further, it is the duty of other social workers to identify impaired social workers and protect clients. Of specific importance is avoiding sexual contact with clients and with those close to clients during and after the therapeutic relationship. Of interest, is the report that social work has done very little research on the incidence of impaired social workers or approaches to helping impaired workers. It is hoped researchers will take up the challenge.

Chapter 5: "Supervision," discusses the importance of supervisors assuring that staff are competent and are performing in competent ways. It is especially important that volunteers be supervised and not perform duties for which they not competent. Social work interns present a special case. Clients must be informed that they are working with an intern. Interns must be supervised regularly. In all cases, supervision must be clearly defined and documented.

Chapter 6: "Consultation, Referral, Documentation, and Records," discusses the liability issues in each area. Consultation is crucial to maintaining a social worker's functioning and in all cases where a social worker is working in an area in which he or she is not competent. Consultation should be sought if medical issues arise, if the social worker has ethical concerns, or if legal issues arise. Referral is common in social work, especially if workers find they are confronted with a situation for which they are not competent or where other expertise is needed. Documentation and record keeping is a crucial part of social work, both for good practice and if the worker is charged. Records should be clear and concise and respond to legal and agency standards. Electronic records must be properly encrypted and protected. Records should be supplied to third parties only with proper informed consent and within applicable legal guidelines. Social workers should supply only the minimum necessary information.

Chapter 7: "Deception and Fraud," deals with those cases where a social worker intentionally deceives. This often relates to third party billing and the desire for reimbursement. In some cases, social workers have been part of schemes to bill for services not provided. For example, the worker uses a wrong diagnosis to gain insurance coverage for the client. In some instances, social workers have taken advantage of clients to gain personal advantage. In no case is deception or fraud acceptable.

Chapter 8: "Termination of Services," discusses two major issues in termination: failure to terminate and premature termination. Clients may terminate at any time because social work supports self-determination, but if the client may be dangerous there may be liability. Social workers have the responsibility to plan termination and to do it at the appropriate time. There can be liability for terminating too early and/or too abruptly. There may be exploitation if a social worker keeps a client in service longer than is necessary.

Chapter 9: "Responding to Lawsuits and Ethics Complaints," provides advice on how to deal with being sued or charged with an ethics violation. It is crucial to retain an attorney to advise and represent you. The chapter provides advice on how to respond in a deposition and in court. It discusses many things to do to avoid these situations.

The book is dense and covers a large number of risk situations. Each chapter provides relevant court cases, ethical statements, and strategies to be certain that one is providing service within legal and ethical rules. Every social work student should read this book, and every social worker should have it as a reference to remind them of the issues, when reviewing their practices, and as a reference, should they face a suit of ethical charge.