

# **Briefing on the Review of the Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers and the Guidelines on Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers**

## **Background**

The Board started launching a review of the Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers and the Guidelines on Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers in late 2004. After two rounds of consultations on the proposed amendments to the documents, the amended versions were finalised. The amended Code of Practice was gazetted to its effect on 15 January 2010.

In the review process, the Board observed that most of the doubts and queries raised by registered social workers (RSWs) on the proposed amendments came from their misunderstandings of the purpose of the review and the contents of the new clauses. The Board wishes to provide them with more details in this brief paper in the hope of easing their concerns.

## **Needs for Review of the Code of Practice and the Guidelines**

The social environment and service needs have undergone rapid changes in the past decade. The Code of Practice and Guidelines published in 1998 and 2000 respectively could hardly cope with the increasingly complex and diversified social services and practice behaviours. The Board therefore decided to review and then amend the Code of Practice and the Guidelines.

## **Process of Review**

When proceeding with the review, the Committee on Professional Conduct took into account new circumstances and scrutinised the Code of Practice and the Guidelines clause by clause. It also made reference to the codes of professional conduct published by some regulatory bodies of other professions, and accreditation bodies in social work of other countries, trying to make the new Code of Practice as comprehensive as possible. The complication of the review was beyond anticipation and the task had taken more than five years to accomplish.

Considering that the Code of Practice was a legal document which meant very important to RSWs, the Board had gone through a thorough review and consultation process before finalizing the amended versions. The Board first issued letters to all RSWs and their employing agencies, and service user groups, inviting their views on

the current Code and Guidelines at the time. After the drafting of the first version of amendments to the two documents, it conducted two rounds of consultations on the proposed amendments in January and September 2009 respectively. During each round, RSWs, agencies and service users were invited to forward their views to the Board direct and two sharing sessions were also organized for them. After each consultation exercise, the Committee on Professional Conduct considered and discussed the gathered opinions in detail, and revised the documents again, trying to accommodate those opinions in the amendments as far as possible. The revised amendments were then submitted to the Board for discussion. After the second round of consultation, the opinions raised by RSWs were addressed in general. The Board then finalized the amended versions of the two documents and put forth the Code of Practice to gazettal.

### **Major Areas of Change in the Code of Practice and the Guidelines**

1. Major changes are made in the Code of Practice while the Guidelines, where necessary, are only revised corresponding to the amended clauses of the Code.
2. The amended clauses in some areas including cultural awareness, self-determination, and confidentiality are more refined, elaborated, and expanded. To cope with the development of social service, new areas including billing practice, interdisciplinary collaboration, supervision and training, consultation, communications between co-workers, sexual relationship, competence, independent practice and call to duty\* are added to the Code of Practice.

*(\*“Call to duty” is by no means a restriction on RSWs to respond to any calls to duty but to that made in a specific situation, where an appeal is clearly spelt out to the people at the scene for the help from a social worker, if there is any among them. This is somewhat like a doctor being called to attend someone in emergency in a public scene. The clause in effect implies upgrading the professional image and status of social workers.)*

3. To avoid disputes, the term “client” in the amended version is more specifically defined.
4. Taking into account the preference of the majority of RSWs’ responses to the CPD survey conducted by the Board in early 2009, the number of hours of continuing professional development in each year that the Board suggests to RSWs is reduced from 24 to 20 in the amended Guidelines.
5. To make the Code of Practice easier to refer to, headings are inserted before

clauses in different areas.

### **Some Issues on the Applicability of the Code of Practice and the Guidelines**

1. The Board understands that some would suggest that a comprehensive list of “dos” and “don’ts” may make the Code and the Guidelines easier for RSWs to follow. It is impossible for the Board, however, to exhaust all scenarios and put down very specific clauses in the Code and the Guidelines. It can only set out necessary principles that RSWs should abide by. In many cases, agencies are responsible for providing their social work employees with detailed guidelines on service delivery.
2. RSWs are keen to know more about the interpretation and applicability of the Code of Practice. Being the final “judge” to determine whether an RSW has committed a disciplinary offence, however, the Board is not in a position to advise whether or not certain behaviour violates the Code of Practice as it cannot pre-empt its decision on an act which may become a subject matter of a complaint to be filed with it in future. To fill the gap, the Board has been co-operating with the Hong Kong Social Workers Association which kindly assigns volunteers (usually experienced social work practitioners) to help answer RSWs’ enquiries of the kind by way of experience-sharing.
3. While the Code of Practice is formulated on consideration of the interests of clients, the Board has done its best in the review process to strike a balance between the interests of clients and the concerns of social workers.

### **Future Development**

Although the amended versions of the Code of Practice and the Guidelines have been finalized, the review of the two documents is an on-going process. RSWs are welcome to forward their feedback on the new versions to the Board from time to time. In future reviews, the Board will adopt a more proactive and diversified approach and explore more avenues to gather opinions from RSWs. For example, other than hosting consultation sessions, the Board may organize focus discussion groups, launching polls, and inviting unions and staff associations to organize meetings or sessions in which the Board’s representatives will talk to the members concerned.

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