

Social Work Ambassador

Denise Kelly, BHSCT



Denise is currently employed by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT) as a Social Work Lead in the Community Specialist Oncology and Palliative Care Team. She took up this post in July 2014.

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As a social work lead I manage the social work service within a multi-professional team in providing mentorship, consultation and co-working support to social work and social care staff supporting people with palliative and/or end of life care needs and those closest to them. We also offer specialist education and training programmes to staff throughout the BHSCT in palliative and end of life care. As a social work lead I represent the voice of social work in the strategic direction of palliative and end of life care both within the Trust and at a regional level across Northern Ireland.

Have you always worked in social work?

I first started my health and social care career as a care assistant in a nursing home before becoming a home care worker in the community. I then started a Psychology Degree and while doing this I worked as a support worker in a respite unit for adults with a learning disability. Following graduation, I travelled the world for a year before coming back to Belfast and working as a social work assistant in Older Peoples Services before applying for the Degree in Social Work in 2005.

Training to be a Social Worker

With a relevant Degree I was accepted onto the 2 year fast track programme for the Degree in Social Work. I believe my experience in health and social care helped me prepare for the application process and the interview for the Degree in Social Work.

The 2 year fast track programme was intense and fast paced and required me to be ready for the opportunities and challenges I would experience as a student social worker. I was fortunate to have experienced two very different practice learning opportunities, the first in the NSPCC Young Witness Service and the second in a Vulnerable Adult Team for Adults with Learning Disabilities.

Professional development

Following graduation, I took up my first social work post in a hospital setting and began my Assessed Year in Employment (AYE). This year offered the opportunity to reflect on my training and to develop the knowledge and skills related to my particular area of practice in the hospital setting.

Following the completion of my AYE, I completed the Initial Professional Development Award (now known as the Consolidation Award). This was a very positive experience for me and really helped me to develop my competence and

confidence as a qualified social worker while allowing me to reflect on practice and consider how I could make a positive change to social work practice in the team.

What would you say to someone considering a career in social work?

If you are compassionate, motivated and have a respect for diversity and the promotion of social justice, then social work may be the career for you. To be a social worker you need to be able to promote the autonomy and self-determination of those we work with who may be some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in society.

What challenges do you face in your job?

Social work is often viewed in a negative context, especially in the media. Our challenge is to strengthen the voice of the profession to promote the good news stories. As a practicing social worker I can see the positive impact of the social work service on people's lives every day. We need to get better at measuring these outcomes to help us to develop and strengthen the future of the social work profession.

In what way is the social work profession rewarding?

I am very proud to be a social worker and find my job rewarding in many ways. In palliative care, I cannot change the outcome for someone, but if I can make that experience a little bit easier for that person and/or their family, then I have done my job. For example, I often support people at the end of life to plan for the future, whether that is to support them complete a funeral plan, write letters for their children or help them to articulate their wishes for the end of their life. While this work can often be emotionally challenging, it can also be the most rewarding part of my job.

How do you see your career progressing?

I am very proud to be a social work lead in palliative care and enjoy developing and strengthening the social work role within a predominantly medical world. I hope to continue in this role for many years to come while considering my own professional development that may one day open up an opportunity to further shape the future of the social work profession.

What does it mean to work in a regulated profession and be registered with NISCC?

It is important to me that social work is a regulated profession through NISCC as this ensures that we are accountable for the quality of our practice and have a set of minimum standards of conduct and practice.

Why did you choose to become a Social Work Ambassador and what do you hope to gain from this role?

I chose to become a Social Work Ambassador to promote the positive aspects of the profession and encourage people to consider social work as a career. I also enjoy the opportunity to meet other ambassadors across Northern Ireland.