



# Gaps in the Social Work Curriculum: Key Health Practitioners Are Not Being Prepared for Sexual Health Work

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## Overview

Sexuality is central to human identity and holistic health and well-being (Bancroft 2009). It is therefore reasonable to conclude that social work, a practice-based profession focused on social justice and supporting people to create healthy lives, would not only understand and value this client strength but also be trained to competently navigate this field of practice.

This study presents findings from a broader mixed methods study which mapped sexual health and well-being services in Sydney, Australia. We present social workers' reflections of working in sexual health to answer the research question:

How were social workers prepared for working in sexual well-being and what skills and knowledge do they identify as essential to practice in this field of practice.



## Methods

After university Ethics approval was obtained, the mixed methods study involved a scoping review of sexual health services. Fifty agencies were identified as providing sexual health services.

From this purposive sample, agency workers were invited to complete a survey (41 responded). Following on from this, six respondents, all social workers, participated in two focus groups by Zoom which were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed.

## Findings

Five overarching themes emerged: (1) training path, (2) disease, disaster, and dysfunction, (3) placement, (4) being 'askable', (5) barriers. Each of these themes along with corresponding codes were described with excerpts from participants' narratives that serve to illuminate the theme.

Theme 1: *Training Path* resulted in two sub-themes: 1. *University Training: sexually silent* which was often absent, in contrast with *Street Training*: "screaming with in-the-trenches learning" that was vibrant, contemporary and all around them.

Theme 2: *Disease, disaster, and dysfunction* highlighted that sexuality education and training in social work programs was often framed from a deficit lens. Participants noted the irony that social workers often embraced a medical model in their approach to client sexuality whereby sexual health is viewed as something to be feared, controlled, and fixed.

Theme 3: *Placement* highlighted the importance of social work field education placement opportunities in sexual health settings to develop student practice knowledge and skills and to build an identity as *sexual* justice practitioners.

Theme 4: *Being 'Askable'* was considered a core social work interpersonal skill applicable in all fields of practice.

Theme 5: *Barriers* resulting in five sub-themes: 1. Curriculum, 2. Medicalisation of sexuality, 3. Social work baggage, 4. Positioning sexuality social work

## Discussion

- 1. Sexual wellness is Social Work:** Social work, a practice-based profession focused on social justice and supporting people's access to and ability to create healthy lives, should not only understand and value a client's sexuality but also be able to competently navigate recognised field of social work practice.
- 2. Sexuality Silenced in Social Work:** However, social workers reported very limited sexuality content in their degree programs and none of the participants had a dedicated subject on generalist human sexuality. Where there was sexuality content, the focus was on disease, disaster and dysfunction, topics such as sexual assault and infertility.
- 3. Core Value Alignment:** Social workers are a natural fit to be sexual wellness allies. Centering service user's sexuality within social work's strengths perspective can provide a framework for social workers (Turner, 2020). Viewing service user sexuality as an asset, allows social work programs to scaffold sexuality content and take a 'sex-positive' framing in their curriculum. Further the location of sexual wellbeing content in social work programs has a significant impact on students and future practitioners, not only in the area of direct practice but also around the understanding and framing of sexual justice social work (Turner, et. al., 2018).
- 4. Askable:** Participants reinforced the need for social workers to be 'askable' – to create space for conversations about sexuality - a core social work communication skill. This study uniquely adds to the current body of social work research by illuminating the gaps in social work education around sexual well-being. This paper is particularly important because it expands the social work discourse around sexuality training, not only for those practitioners preparing to practice in sexual health, but by positing the need for all social workers to be able to practice from a sexuality informed practice lens.