Ethical Issues Related to Sexual Abuse of Disabled Persons

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to provide some comments that will assist readers in reviewing their thoughts and feelings in regard to their ethical responsibilities when confronted with situations involving sexual abuse of disabled persons.

DEFINITION OF THE ISSUE

Thomas defines ethics as "a system of moral principles or standards governing conduct."1 When these ethics are related to a health profession they concern the relationship of the health professional to the client, the client's family, colleagues, and society at large. The focus of this paper will be on ethical issues for health professionals, in particular how ethical standards may be applied when one is confronted with situations involving sexual abuse of disabled persons. However, it is important for health professionals to remind themselves that such ethical dilemmas are not theirs alone; they are frequently shared by others such as the clients themselves, clients' families, student professionals, academics in health related programs, community agencies, and members of the public.

There are several component parts to ethics; Purtilo & Cassel discuss five such parts. In summary they are as follows:

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Moral character—one who is honest, caring, and reasonable.

Moral obligations—belief in commitment to various parties such as client, employer, profession, society.

Rights—of individuals or particular groups... especially of clients.

Justice—a sense of what is right... in the treatment of one individual as compared to others... in provision of compensation and punishments... whether procedures are fair.

Moral accountability—those to whom one is accountable.²

Conflicts arise when professionals are faced with situations where their commitments or accountabilities to two or more parties are not compatible. For example, if nurses were directed to treat clients in a manner that they considered inappropriate—to whom would they be accountable for their decision to treat or not treat in said manner, their clients, their profession, or their employer? If a social worker hears, indirectly, that a colleague is abusing a client—how does he determine the truth of the situation and initiate appropriate action, while maintaining his accountability to his client and to his profession?

There is a particular dimension to the relationships between health professionals and disabled clients that is of special importance in relation to sexual abuse—that is advocacy.²

Purtilo and Cassel define an advocate as: “one who works on behalf of another, usually a more vulnerable or underprivileged person.”² If, as part of their moral principles and standards (ethics), professionals believe in the rights of their clients, then they must be prepared to defend them when they are violated, and sexual abuse is most certainly a violation.

Conceptual Framework

In order to examine how professionals may specifically exercise their ethical standards in relation to sexual abuse of disabled persons a framework that identifies three levels of action and four relationship patterns will be presented. The conceptual framework for client-centered practice of Occupational Therapy³,⁴, used extensively by the writer, provides the basis for the framework presented here (fig. 1).