

Case Study 1 – Lee Zook, Ph.D.

While I was at Children' Agency, Mary Jones (a fictitious name) applied for a job as a social worker. Four years earlier, I had seen Mary as a client while working for an emergency service at Adult Hospital, a psychiatric facility for adults.

My contact with Mary had been rather brief at Adult Hospital. She came to be admitted to the hospital as her psychiatric condition was deteriorating. Mary told me she was a social worker with an MSW and had been in and out of psychiatric hospitals for many years. I located her chart, noted that she was previously diagnosed with schizophrenia, undifferentiated type, did the basic paperwork that social workers did on admission, consulted with the admitting psychiatrist, and took her to the hospital ward. It was a rather simple, routine admission; there were no police or court documents, and she was a voluntary client. However, the situation was a bit unsettling. My feelings had to do with the fact that I was leaving my position in the near future to pursue an MSW, and here I was, a young, rather inexperienced, “untrained” social worker, admitting an older, more experienced social worker with an MSW to a psychiatric hospital. However, I went on with my business and put the event in perspective. After all, academic degrees do not preclude a person from having a mental illness.

So now, three years later, I have my MSW, and Mary came for a job interview at Children' Agency where I was employed. I had no responsibility for employment decisions. My supervisor, who was the Director of Social Services, and the psychiatrist, who was also the Executive Director, made these decisions. But I was faced with an uncomfortable dilemma—an ethical dilemma for which I did not see any clear answer.

On one hand, I was concerned about whether Mary would function as a competent professional colleague. Was her illness in remission? If so, would it remain in remission? If not, what would the impact be on clients? Would she be able to function adequately to work with clients who came to the agency? If she would not, would harm come to clients?

On the other hand, my knowledge of her illness was unquestionably confidential. Further, what right or responsibility did I have to suggest that a person who had a mental illness should not be hired? What right or responsibility did I have to divulge information about her (past) condition to anyone?

There was also the possibility that I could speak to Mary and verbalize my concerns to her. Would this be appropriate? Would Mary remember who I was? After three years, did the brief encounter we had give me the prerogative to confront her about her past or ask about her present condition?

I did have knowledge of Mary' impairment. However, to infer that her impairment would interfere with her work as a professional social worker could be seen as prejudiced toward persons with a mental illness.

Since Mary was a professional, didn't she have the responsibility to make sure her "mental health difficulties" did not interfere with her professional judgment?

In summary, there seemed to be no ideal course of action in this situation. I did not know how to predict what would happen if I talked with Mary. It is conceivable that I would have a colleague who was less than happy with my reminding her of her illness. If I did intervene by reporting to persons responsible for hiring, confidential information would be divulged. I could be identified as practicing discrimination toward persons with a mental illness. If I did not intervene, and she was hired, harm could come to clients.

There seemed to be no ideal answer and no way to avoid the situation. There may have been other options, but none seemed apparent to me at the time.

What would you do? How would you decide what you would do?