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UNDERSTANDING THE WORK EXPERIENCES, COPING STRATEGIES AND ORGANISATIONAL RETENTION OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN GAUTENG IN-PATIENT SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT CLINICS

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A research report submitted to the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts by course work and research report in Industrial Social Work.

May 2008

DECLARATION

I, Alexandrina Vermeulen declare that this research report is my own unaided work and that I have given full acknowledgement in the sources I have used. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Social Work in Industrial Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

_____

Alexandrina Vermeulen

30 May 2008

DEDICATION

This research report is dedicated to all the social workers fighting a silent but deadly war on substance abuse in South Africa. Your passion, tenacity and commitment are an inspiration to all and provide hope to many clients and their families.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my Higher Power for giving me the courage, strength and willpower to complete this research report. A special word of thanks to my supervisor Francine Davies for supervising my research report, for her enthusiasm, constructive feedback and allowing me to be creative within a specific structure. I am very grateful to all the organizations and participants that provided me with valuable information and shared with me their world of work and all the challenges they faced every day. I am also thankful to Danette, Angeles and my family that have believed in me and supported me through the trying times.

ABSTRACT

South Africa has experienced a drastic shortage of social workers. This shortage has affected many social welfare organizations, particularly those who offer services in the area of substance abuse. According to a recent study conducted by Earle (2008) many reasons could be ascribed to the high social work turnover, these include: poor working conditions; poor compensation of work; lack of resources and support; and increased demands for services. Hence, social workers are experiencing work stress, burnout and compassion fatigue taxing their personal and professional coping strategies which could lead to staff turnover. The primary aim of this study was to understand the work experiences, coping strategies and organisational retention of social workers in Gauteng in-patient substance abuse treatment centres. The study had an exploratory-descriptive design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative paradigms to explore the work environment of the organisations and participants. Purposive sampling was used to select and divide the participants into three categories: entry level social workers; experienced social workers and social workers that had left the substance abuse field. Data was collected through conducting in-depth interviews and through a questionnaire completed by the representatives from in-patient substance abuse treatment centres. This questionnaire was piloted with an in-patient treatment centre in KwaZulu Natal. The results of the quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, which were illustrated via tables and figures and the qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The main findings of this study confirmed most of the reasons for work stress and burnout that may lead to staff turnover identified in previous studies by Ross (1997) and Earle (2008). These findings are incorporated into a retention model developed by the researcher. The model incorporated five stages: stage one focussed on the reasons for entering the substance abuse field (personal interests, undergraduate studies and/or accidental); stage two explored preparation of social workers by organisations after entry to the field; stage three identified four general factors that effects the sustainability of social workers (external/environmental influences, organisational factors, the type of client population, career opportunities and personal factors); stage four explained the individual differences in coping responses (negative or positive) to job stress either through fight responses, self-care strategies for retention or flight responses, staff turnover; lastly, stage five focussed on what organisations can do to reduce staff turnover. These findings can assist the occupational social worker to identify these retention challenges and develop strategies to reduce the risk of staff turnover.

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