CLINICAL PRACTICE WITH CAREGIVERS OF DEMENTIA PATIENTS


Individuals and families caring for dementia patients often face long and difficult journeys. Increasingly, mental health practitioners have the opportunity to support and advise them in this process. Clinical Practice with Caregivers of Dementia Patients is designed to offer basic information on dementing illnesses and clinical intervention strategies to practitioners. After practicing with family caregivers for 20 years Mary Kaplan faced personal challenge and loss when her mother contracted Alzheimer’s disease. The book begins with a vignette based on Kaplan’s personal journey. This combination of professional and personal understanding enlightens and informs the reader throughout.

In her first chapter, Kaplan offers one of the most thorough descriptions of potentially dementing illnesses I have read—one that would be useful in the classroom as well as the clinic. With careful reference to current research, this chapter examines the symptoms, types, and causes of dementia in terms readily understood by lay people as well as social work professionals. Kaplan’s subsequent chapters on assessment and treatment apply three major theoretical frameworks to the caregiving situation: ecological perspective, systems theory, and conflict theory. In addition to “bread and butter” techniques such as the use of a genogram in family assessment, Kaplan provides more unusual fare, including the application of conflict theory to address value and power struggles within families.

Kaplan’s chapter on caregiver support groups is characteristically thorough, addressing both the logistics of setting up a group and the interpersonal dynamics of group operation. In the chapter on caregiver education I found a gem labeled, “Developing Caregiver Advocacy Skills.” Too often, practitioners focus on ameliorating emotional distress and fail to channel caregivers’ legitimate anger toward unresponsive institutions and bureaucrats. Kaplan offers specific advice, not only to facilitate individual advocacy, but also to encourage group efforts to address broader legislative and budgetary concerns. The book’s final chapters address community services, three groups of special caregivers, settings in which caregivers receive counseling, and caring for the caregiver.

In writing this book for practitioners Kaplan chose (appropriately, I think) to focus on the caregiving situation from the perspective of the caregiver. Although useful, this perspective is not without its limitations. The most glaring is a tendency to objectify the patient. In essence, the victim of dementia becomes “the problem,” or “the source of problems,” and loses his or her status as a person. Kaplan at times avoids this general problem. She acknowledges that, “Patients who are in the early stages of a dementing illness and still have the ability... should have the opportunity to be involved in the mediation process.” (p. 52). She also notes that case managers may find it hard to balance the interests of patients and caregivers in deciding “who is the client?” (p. 84). Here I think the book could go further, and in its next incarnation might focus at least one chapter on the patient.

This remarkably thorough book does have a few omissions. It addresses the needs of long-distance caregivers, professional caregivers, and those caring for developmentally disabled patients but omits male caregivers. It is also largely geared to urban and suburban contexts, offering little to those few practitioners who work in rural and frontier settings. Overall though, the reader will find a wealth of valuable information offered in a lively and well-organized format.

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INFERTILITY: PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES AND COUNSELING STRATEGIES


Infertility: Psychological Issues and Counseling Strategies is a comprehensive review and discussion of the issues related to infertility, which affects 15 percent of U.S. couples. Chapters cover all the issues with which a therapist in
practice with infertile couples would need to be familiar, including diagnostic procedures, new productive technologies, emotional responses and problems experienced by infertile couples, and the ethical dilemmas that may be confronted in practice in a reproductive treatment setting. Although the book does not present specific original therapeutic techniques for this population, applications of existing therapeutic principles are illustrated particularly well with interesting case examples and discussion. Finally, three chapters are devoted to the critical issues of terminating infertility treatment, including a relatively brief discussion of adoption and related issues.

This book integrates the scientific research and clinical material well, presenting technical medical discussions clearly for the nonmedical, highly educated group that will be interested in this topic. Although the data on “cutting-edge” technology and current success rates of the various procedures will be outdated very quickly, they provide the practitioner a good grounding for working with couples as they weigh the costs against the potential benefits of available technologies.

The discussion about the ethics of assisted reproduction are particularly important, as the development of new options requires both practitioners and would-be parents to confront issues to which they may have previously given no thought. Some issues are particularly familiar to social workers (for example, questions of distributive justice as they relate to the high cost of many procedures and their resulting unavailability to all but the affluent); they are issues that cannot be left to agency or program policy alone. For social workers, it would have been helpful for the book to include discussions of ethical principles of professions other than medicine. Although many of the substantive issues are similar, social workers’ responsibility to the family as a client unit and to disadvantaged clients may call for additional focus on some of these issues.

The other area of this book that is inadequate for the needs of the social worker in practice with infertile patients is the chapter on adoption. This limitation is perhaps inevitable, given the scope of coverage and the fact that most practitioners in the area of infertility would refer families on to an adoption agency when the time arises. However, to help patients make the decision and prepare them to move on to adoption, the social worker in this area needs to read well beyond this brief, though informative, introduction to adoption, particularly about the process of applying and being studied for adoption.

Only two issues make an otherwise very useful book. First, most chapters include no references from the social work literature. The chapter on ethics, for example, includes no references from social work although there are some excellent ones. This chapter also fails to place these questions in a broader ethical framework, which would be helpful to social workers in generalizing from medical to social work ethics. Second, errors in spelling and mechanics (“relevat” instead of “relevant”), while more and more common, even with reputable publishers, result in a loss of credibility with some readers.

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Relevant Books Received