

By Cheryl Moskaluk

feature article

Close-up: Competence chair believes in building up the social work profession

Counselling is the strongest thread in Edward Sandberg's life vision. This singular passion has driven his job choice, education, and volunteer commitments. In his 25 year-career as a social worker in mental health therapy, Edward has woven a resolute mix of maverick missions and dynamic team projects, and he brings strong leadership qualities and counselling perspectives to his position as chair of ACSW's Competence Committee



Edward Sandberg

Few dare go where Edward's private practice takes him—he specializes in counselling around non-mainstream sexuality issues. He hears out those of all sexual orientations, including clients engaged in alternative lifestyles dedicated to what they define as sexual kink of the highest order. All share the need for validation of their humanity, and a safe, non-judgmental place to be counselled. Helping people sort out complex depression and anxiety issues and helping them separate self-damaging behavior from what empowers them is the order of the day. While collegial associations in this work are few, the

other dimensions of Edward's professional life catapult him into the demands of team consultation and approaches.

He started work last fall as a mental health therapist Edmonton's Northeast Community Health Centre, where he uses his counselling skills in a groundbreaking "shared-care" model of practice—a complimentary approach developed over the past five years. Physicians in the city's northeast refer patients to the centre for mental health assessments. Edward consults on diagnoses and makes recommendations for treatment.

“It’s just taking off now and there’s talk of taking it across the city. This is cutting edge; it’s comprehensive and integrated care,” Edward says. “Doctors send us a referral and tell us what they would like done. I might spend 45 minutes with a person and then often the doctor will join the patient and myself. My mandate is to do short-term counselling and then refer the client on and bridge them into other care they might need.”

Edward volunteers as a mentor and facilitates monthly peer consultation meetings of counsellors for the Pride Centre of Edmonton. He has come full circle from the first time he walked through the doors of the organization (then known as Gay Alliance Toward Equality) at 17. In a time when it was uncommon for a teenager to be openly gay, Edward took his first bold steps toward a counselling career with a 40-hour peer counselling course. For 10 years, he pulled a weekly three-hour shift with the Gay Alliance, often counselling people older than himself. He earned his BA in psychology, later working at the AIDS Network of Edmonton as an outreach support worker, including stints at the city’s clinic for sexually transmitted diseases.

“I saw a lot of people newly diagnosed with HIV—there weren’t many people doing this work at that time. When I got that job I realized I wanted more education. What I realized is that I wanted to have the capacity to work on my own.” In bettering his position to enter a Master’s program, a BSW degree appeared in his sights.

“What I have come to see is that psychologists and clinical social workers do essentially the same thing. They have parallel educations. The one main difference is that psychologists are really focused on what’s going on between the ears. What clicked for me, as they say in the Faculty, is that the whole story is about ‘Person in Environment.’ Social complexity is so much a part of a person’s self-image. Being a gay man and coming up from that early training as a peer counsellor, I know that environment is crucial. That’s why I identify as a social worker.”

Edward completed his BSW in 1995 while continuing his work at the AIDS Network—where he counted the deaths of

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79 people he had worked with in just three and a half years. The experience informed his views on his schoolwork and on health and discrimination. After completing his Master’s of Social Work at University of Hawaii, he returned to the Edmonton AIDS Network as a manager. But again counselling called, and in 1997, Edward set up his own practice in Edmonton.

In 2001 a job on a forensic rehabilitation unit at Alberta Hospital provided him opportunity to do more traditional social work, focusing on helping clients with finances, issues of trustees and guardianship and discharge planning. The knowledge he gained about the legal and mental health systems and severe mental illnesses has been invaluable in his subsequent work in Capital Health.

Edward joined the Competence Committee two years ago when a design for the five-year pilot project for Continuing Competence was being completed, and took over as committee chair in February. A little foggy on his reasons for originally becoming involved, he chalks it up to the other side of his nature that is a “committee animal.”

He’s very clear on his intent now: “Before I got involved in the committee work for ACSW, I might have been one of those people who sort of wondered, well what does the College do for me? The biggest thing that has become evident for me is that we are the membership, the members are the College. It’s not just a distant body.”

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Edward acknowledges that the whole process requiring social workers to look at their work—and annually document the ways in which they comply with standards for competence—is new and unfamiliar turf for everyone. In 2004, the requirement that social workers submit portfolios detailing competence credits every five years, had committee members reviewing more than 700 portfolios. About another 1,000 are expected this year.

The focus of the committee is not to measure the competence of social workers, but to help with the process of compliance, fielding questions and dealing with concerns. As chair of a regulatory committee, Edward holds a non-voting seat on ACSW Council. He's dedicated to tackling the communication issues around the

Common threads

100 years of social activism in Alberta



Maude Riley, seen here with children in Calgary in the 1950s, was president of the Alberta Council on Child and Family Welfare from 1923 to 1962. She believed that communities could be best served through a network of public agencies and local organizations that kept their focus on the common good, served by helping children. A government beleaguered by war and economic depression that could find money for education, could also find it for the physical and mental care of children, she contended. "The former is of little use without the latter." (Photo from Glenbow Archives PA-3647-4)

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competence pilot project and the College as a whole. He goes so far as to say that if social workers aren't heard in this process, then ACSW just doesn't work.

So why would a maverick counsellor like Edward Sandberg care if a college of such diverse professionals works or not? The answer lies in his strong identification as a social worker and his passion for helping people become their best selves. He accepts that because social work is now a designated profession under Alberta's *Health Professions Act*, ACSW does have a regulatory responsibility to look out for public interest, to ensure that social work is in fact practiced according to the standards the profession sets for itself.

"But that doesn't take away from the fact that the College exists as a group of social workers whose interest is to help each and every person be the best social worker he or she can be."

If there's resistance in the process, then Edward looks at it as he would in his therapeutic practice. "Resistance isn't the client's problem, it's not the client who is automatically wrong. Resistance is what happens when a therapist is not on a client's wavelength. The best way to help Alberta's social workers do their best work is not to order our colleagues around, it's to ask what can we do to help them get those skills and training and how we can support their needs. Then we can confidently say that Alberta social workers are well-trained qualified professionals." ■

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