Psychiatric Aide/Assistant

General Overview
Psychiatric aides/assistants (PA) work at assisting mentally or emotionally disturbed patients in their treatment as well as their daily lives. These individuals work in a wide variety of mental health settings and carry out a large range of duties. Generally, a PA will work under the direction of nursing and medical staff to assist them whenever required (O*net). This includes psychiatric orderlies. This type of work has been referred to as the ‘front line’ of mental health intervention as most work is completed directly with the patient.

Job Duties and Responsibilities
The PA can be responsible for different tasks depending on the work environment in which one is employed. Typically though the PA can be asked to complete various physical and mental checks (e.g., vital signs, eating habits, reactions to treatment) on the patient, providing a report of observations to the supervising professional (O*net). These individuals are often required to assist the patient bathing, dressing, or grooming; as well as ensuring a clean, safe, and orderly environment for the patient is maintained. In addition, a PA may be asked to organize or assist in any variety of social, educational, or recreational activities as required (O*net). Serving meals and assisting in feeding a patient is often required. In some situations, a PA may even be asked to psychically restrain or assist a patient in order to prevent injury to all involved. It is not uncommon as a PA to assist in patient transportation.

Typical Workday
The typical workday that a PA would experience varies greatly depending on the environment in which one works. Individuals can expect to spend long hours on their feet, performing numerous physical activities, following set routines and procedures. Individuals working in a home setting may be expected to assist in general housekeeping chores such as grocery shopping or other errands (O*net). Whereas a PA working in a hospital or long-term care setting may be asked to assist in various procedures. Regardless of the work environment, a PA should expect to spend a great deal of time working in groups and interacting face-to-face with individual suffering from mental illness.

Educational Requirements and Other Qualifications
The minimum required education to start work as a PA is a high school diploma or equivalent. However, many acquire further education in order to allow themselves a greater realm of responsibility (O*net). In Canada it is often required that a PA also have successfully completed trainings programs in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first aid; training in safe patient handling is often required as well. Any specific training needed based on where the PA might work is typically provided by the employer. A general competence with basic medical tools is expected (e.g., blood pressure kits, heating/cooling pads, glucose monitors) but specific information should be provided as it pertains to a specific job. Additional education and supplemental training can increase the amount of responsibilities that may be left with that individual.
Related Skills, Interests, and Qualities

Basic skills associated with success in this field include: patience, tolerance, calmness, good observational and communication skills, teamwork skills, the ability to follow instructions and adapt as needed, and a friendly, warm, compassionate nature. Good active listening skills are vital to almost all aspects of the job. A strong understanding of how others react in different situations is helpful, but a persuasive nature is often necessary in order to get others to change their minds or behaviour (O*net). Clarity in writing and speech are essential to effective communication, and strong critical thinking and reasoning abilities will help ensure the patient receives the best treatment possible. Good monitoring and recording skills are important in order to make corrections or improvements as necessary. The ability to develop and maintain strong interpersonal relationships is important in becoming a meaningful part of a mental health team.

Relevance of Psychology Undergraduate Degree

An undergraduate degree in psychology provides one with information about mental health that allows a deeper understanding of mental disorder and what it can be like for one who suffers from a mental illness. This knowledge will help in creating a warm, empathetic relationship with the patient, as well as helping with monitoring and reporting changes seen in the patient. As a PA might often be asked questions regarding various concepts or procedures, a background of psychology knowledge will better allow the PA to fully answer questions from the patient. Also, an ability to interpret new information (scientific literature) relevant to ones specific work environment as it becomes available will help in making sure current procedures are followed. Writing and communication skills gained throughout the undergraduate degree in psychology will aid in recording and presenting information to a supervising physician.

Salary Potential

The average salary for a PA across Canada can range from $16/hour to upwards of $30/hour depending on experience, certification, and location of work (GC). This translates into and average salary for full-time workers of approximately $40 000/year. In 2012, an estimated 71% of workers in this field were employed full-time (GC). Workers in Western Canada (e.g., British Columbia, Alberta) tend to be higher paid when compared to other regions of the country (e.g., Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador). It is not uncommon however for a PA to exceed the average stated salary with additional training and significant work experience.

Job Outlook

The demand for jobs in this field has seen a significant increase in employment from 2008-2010 and over the period from 2011-2020 jobs are expected to be in excess demand-meaning a shortage of workers is expected (GC). As with most health-care related occupations, Canada’s aging population and strong emphasis on adequate health-care will help drive this sharp increase in demand.

To Apply

Many applications can be found through online job search engines or through similar government sponsored search engines. A majority of this field finds employment in hospital or similar long-term care facilities.
To Know More
If becoming a psychiatric aide/assistant interests you, visit the O*Net Online resource center for more information at: http://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/31-1013.00.
References
