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COMMENTARY

"HELP, MY RECORDS LOOK LIKE A SUDOKU PUZZLE!"

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Abstract

Client information and records should be a sacred taonga yet are often devalued and end up resembling a sudoku puzzle—where readers must fill in the gaps. Despite record-keeping being crucial to decision-making and service-users' experiences, practitioners often are not taught how to keep good records (particularly in time-poor environments). This knowledge gap is then compounded by organisations not articulating a structure for their documentation or expounding how their values and cultural responsivity should be expressed. This commentary provides practical assistance as to how practitioners can complete case notes in time-poor situations by collating case-noting methods, drawing on four models developed by Western researchers. It also explores my reflections about what being a tangata Tiriti meant for my documentation and includes two illustrative examples that I created so my records are more culturally responsive and honouring of te Tiriti o Waitangi and of the client.

Keywords

case notes, documentation, culturally responsive, time efficient, writing templates

Introduction

In my own personal journey, I have been exploring what it means to be a practitioner who is tangata Tiriti. After thinking about what it means for when I am kanohi ki te kanohi with clients, I challenged myself to go further and ask, "What does it also mean in my documentation?" In my consultations with others, I discovered that not only was there a dearth of information about how case notes could be completed expediently, there was also a vacuum around how documentation could express culturally responsivity and the organisation's values. I hope that by sharing my own journey I will encourage others to initiate a positive dialogue about what can be done so that records are not only completed expeditiously, but also honour the people who entrusted their stories to us.

Background

Looking back on my career, I recognise that it would have been invaluable to have learnt earlier about how to write case notes, emails and reports that are comprehensive while still being time efficient. As a practitioner, I experienced

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the pressure of large caseloads and the inevitable impact on my documentation. In private practice, I experienced how spending time on paperwork eroded profitability. As a supervisor, a manager and an auditor I have concluded that the issue of ensuring comprehensive documentation in a time-poor sector has been largely unaddressed—let alone how to complete it in a way that is culturally responsive and which honours the client's story.

I have not met a single colleague who ever said, "I wanted to be a social worker so I could write case notes and reports." While professional standards (e.g., Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2019) require the maintaining of accurate records, there is uncertainty as to how this can be done and a tension with the persistent narrative among practitioners that paperwork is a bureaucratic requirement that steals time from "real" work.

Social workers are pressed for time and assist people in dire circumstances. They are also increasingly under scrutiny and need to be accountable in their practice. My experience as a supervisor and auditor is that there is limited dialogue about how documentation can be completed, let alone enhanced. Considering that Lillis et al. (2020) found that social workers spend between 68% and 95% of their time writing, I want this commentary to encourage discussion about documentation so that records do not look like sudoku puzzles—where other staff must guess and fill in the blanks—and instead truly honour the work that staff do with clients.

Value of recording

If we want to improve the quality of paperwork, we must first critique our attitude towards it and understand the purposes of documentation. I have found case notes to be immensely valuable in prompting my own memory of what I discussed or agreed with a client. When you have back-to-back meetings or an unexpected crisis and are about to rush out the door, it is a relief to be able to look through your notes and reorientate yourself.

While most workers are aware how records can help them remember, I have been astonished at the paradox that case notes also "help you to forget". I have found that the act of documenting my work and actions required serves as a method of self-care. The process clears my mind, alleviating my subconscious need to continue to remember for fear of failing to do something I am responsible for.

Early in my career, experienced colleagues taught me the importance of documentation and taking CARE (Cover A***, Retain Employment). While this acronym is crass, case notes do protect practitioners by recording what was done, offered and advised—all of which are vital if there is a complaint, serious incident or audit. The adage "If it is not in the notes then it didn't happen" stems from the reality that auditors and colleagues will not know what happened if it is not recorded and you are not around to ask. Recording therefore not only assists continuity of care when the practitioner is not available, or when working in multidisciplinary teams, but also means that clients do not have to be re-traumatised (or disrespected) by having to repeat themselves.

Quality records strengthen analysis and increase the viability of interventions and relapse prevention/safety plans. Staniforth and Larkin (2006) quote Kagle (1993): "A case record documents the evolution of a case worker's diagnostic thinking" (p. 15). I would go further, however, and say case notes are themselves an agent in that evolution. That agency can be biased and fallible, though, without considering what is recorded.

Cautions about colonisation, power and fair representation

Case notes, reports and emails are not neutral artefacts. They are an expression of professional knowledge and (un)conscious organisational and social contexts and biases. I advocate that organisations critique how their documentation reflects their values rather than just their contractual obligations. Social workers often pride themselves on being strengths-based and emphasise the importance of people's mana, yet records are silent or under-proportionate in detailing this. When practitioners can speak about amazing transformations (or even "small changes") but have not recorded them, they do a disservice to themselves, their organisation and their clients.

It is therefore important to ask whose voice is being heard or silenced within records and how this affects decisions. We give a voice to the voiceless when we honour people by recording their experiences and perspectives in "their" records.

Taiuru (2018) explores the issue of documentation ownership and whom data should be accessible to, advocating that any data about a person is a sacred taonga. When we view records as treasure belonging to clients, then our handling of information becomes the outworking of respect. To respect someone's mana and the information that pertains to them (and their whānau), we should regularly consult with the client about what gets recorded rather than relying on our role as a

mandatory service or on an initial consent form that was signed at the first engagement. White and Epston (1989) have long challenged traditional positioning and documentation ownership by advocating therapeutic letters. Writing with or to the client not only assists in making case notes respectful but is also a great strategy for practitioners struggling with writer's block.

Making records time efficient and comprehensive

While those in the people-helping professions might agree with the rationale for having good documentation and have an aspiration to be respectful with client information, there remains the question of how this can be satisfactorily completed while also being time efficient. This is a current problem, but it is by no means a new one. As long ago as 1964, Weed identified physicians would say they did not have time for records, and rebutted this as an excuse:

> It is no excuse to say that the problems are different, the emergencies greater and the patient cannot wait. Indeed, the greater the emergency and the more complex the problem … the greater the discipline [of accurate and scientific record-keeping] needs to be. (p. 276)

Weed (1964) also, however, asserted that record-keeping needed to be expected and taught. Leon and Pepe (2010) bemoan that "despite the importance of documentation skills, many undergraduate social work programs do not provide sufficient curriculum content on client record keeping" (p. 362).

McAllister et al. (2019) and Naepi (2019) found that Māori and Pasifika, respectively, continue to be disproportionately excluded from university positions within New Zealand, with the number of Māori academic staff remaining consistent at circa 5% from 2012 to 2017 and their Pasifika making up only 1.7% of the academic workforce. The number of Māori and Pasifika academic staff does have a bearing on how te ao Māori and Pasifika worldviews are expressed in curricula and how students in the people-helping professions learn about being culturally responsive. It is likely, therefore, that in New Zealand the marginal amount of training that students do receive in record-keeping will be taught from a te ao Pākehā perspective.

In delivering training, I have discovered that many practitioners have not been introduced to any methods (regardless of a cultural lens) to assist documentation. As the Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1955) teaches, "You don't know what you don't know." Instead of organisations blaming staff for substandard or missing documentation, they need to critique their organisation's culture towards record-keeping. Do their practitioners see documenting a client's records and progress as a sacred taonga or as an administrative function? Has the organisation deliberately exerted its autonomy, giving thought to how records will embody and express its values? If it has not, practitioners will just be left to their own accord, resulting in a variety of competencies, and after an audit, the organisation will have to assimilate the homogeneity dictated by the contract funders. If organisations have decided what they want to express, including their unique therapy characteristics, have they then adequately supported the documentation of these through training, administration time allocation, templates and technology?

Staff are aware of requirements concerning the timeliness of documentation but often cannot do this with their workloads or when the system (which in this day and age includes templates, software platforms and the organisation's expectations) is cumbersome. Staniforth and Larkin (2006) introduce the acronym FACTS (Factual, Accurate, Complete, Timely, System). While there has been a focus on FACT, little attention has been given to systems. Staniforth and Larkin (2006) cite SOAP (see below) as a system example but note that it does not address all situations.

As there is a dearth of guidance on how to write case notes, in this commentary I have collated four models developed by Western researchers, and two inspired by te ao Māori that I created to assist me in being more culturally responsive.

Western-centric models

SOAP

This health sector model was created by Lawrence Weed in 1964 and is particularly helpful in establishing what the problem is and succinctly recording what will be done.

> **S**ubjective: What have you been told (e.g., by the client or referral form)?
> **O**bjective: What are the facts?
> **A**ssessments: What is your analysis ([dis]prove the hypothesis)?
> **P**lan: What are the client and you going to do?

STAR

Created by Development Dimensions International in 1974, STAR was the first case note structure I learnt. *Astoundingly, this wasn't until four years*

into my career! As a case manager I often changed the "Result" to "Rationale" so I could cite why a particular pathway was chosen.

Situation: Ascertain the problem/opportunity
Task: Identify tasks (goals or options)
Action: Record actions taken
Result: The outcome(s)

SBAR

In the early 2000s, this US Navy model began being promoted in the health sector (Leonard et al., 2004).

Situation: What is the client experiencing?
Background: Relevant vital information (e.g., contributing factors/history)
Assessment: Information pertinent to the "here and now" and options
Recommendation: Best course of action

Results-Based Accountability

Results-Based Accountability (RBA) is a way of thinking and acting to improve entrenched and complex social problems. Developed by Mark Friedman in the United States, RBA is used by the Ministry of Social Development (2017) and asks three simple questions to get at the most important performance measures:

- How much did we do?
- How well did we do it?
- Is anyone better off?

A common critique of file reviews is that it often looks like practitioners have not done much because they have failed to record the effort/time involved. Having a prompt of "How much did we do?" is useful to mitigate this (e.g., "It actually took four visits or half a day to ...").

This structure also reminds us to record the difference that therapy or an intervention has made, which is often only asked in a post-service survey. Yet, this question acts as a therapeutic intervention itself, shifting focus to what is working/changing. While this structure does not include the rationale for why things are done, this could be easily added.

Models inspired by te ao Māori

Although the above systems have enhanced my work and saved me time by teaching me how to structure my records, none of them overtly prioritised cultural responsivity. In my journey of learning about being tangata Tiriti I have wondered how this also could be apparent and congruent in my documentation.

In the Pōwhiri Poutama model, Huata (1997) and Drury (2007) explore how the stages of a pōwhiri could be used as a metaphor when working with Māori whānau to connect spiritually and relationally prior to identifying and working through issues, and highlighting the importance of closing sessions safely. While Huata (1997) affected my practice from quite an early stage, it is only in the last couple of years that I have been exploring with cultural advisors how my commitment to being tangata Tiriti should also be apparent and congruent in my documentation. I recognise my limits in being tauiwi and include the examples below not as a definitive list but simply as an illustration of my own journey and as an encouragement to others to consider how they too might begin to express their values in their documentation. I note that te reo words can have multiple meanings. "Ringa", for example, can be translated as "hands" and "weapons"; likewise, "māngai" translates as "mouth" and "barrel of a gun" (Moorfield, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). This reminds practitioners of the need to listen and understand rather than rushing into an intervention, lest we do harm.

These definitions are translated as relevant to this context and have been informed by colleagues and *Te Aka Māori Dictionary*.

Kōrerorero—dialogue-based example

Kōrerorero is a dialogue-based model that guides structured, safe and inclusive discussion, particularly when there are multiple parties present.

Karanga: A process used in a pōwhiri to assist with safety; determining who parties are and the reason you are there.
Kōrerorero: What was discussed and possible solutions?
Kupu whakaae: What we collectively agreed.

Rongo—senses-based example

The Rongo model supports deeper relational engagement by focusing on sensory and emotional awareness. This model encourages practitioners to slow down, tune in and co-create solutions that affirm the client's autonomy and cultural identity. It is particularly helpful during home visits or assessments.

Ngakau (Heart)	We connected… *Without rapport and mutual commitment, endeavours are annulled.*

Kanohi (Eyes)	I observed…
Māngai (Mouth)	I asked… *We need to check our understanding and sensitively explore relevant issues for example, safety.*
Pokotaringa (Ears)	They said… *If we are to act in accordance with the Treaty of Waitangi principles of 'partnership' and 'participation', then rather than dictating what will happen we instead need to affirm people's autonomy and contribution to design solutions.*
Ringa (Hands)	I/They/We did… *Recording agreed actions.*

Conclusion

Many tertiary-trained practitioners, let alone other staff or volunteers in the people-helping professions, have not received sufficient training in documentation. Sometimes an attitude exists that paperwork gets in the way of the "real work". Rather than records being dismissed as bureaucratic requirements, documentation should be prioritised and perceived as a practice tool that improves analysis and services. If records are a sacred treasure that clients have entrusted to us, then our treatment of records should be an action of respecting the client. Therefore, organisations need to proactively critique their culture towards documentation and how they systemically hinder or assist succinct recording.

As there is a lack of record-keeping training, I hope that this commentary benefits practitioners by giving them practical examples of structures that will assist them to be comprehensive in their record-keeping while still being time efficient. Furthermore, I hope that my reflections about how as a practitioner I am considering what being tangata Tiriti means for *all* elements of my practice—including my record-keeping—encourage other practitioners and organisations to consider how their records can espouse their own values, do justice to the efforts of staff and honour the client's story.

Glossary

I acknowledge that words often have multiple meanings (and depths). These definitions are only rudimentarily translated below as relevant to the context of this article. These translations have been informed by colleagues and *Te Aka Māori Dictionary*.

kanohi/kanohi ki te kanohi	being together in person; face-to-face
karanga	ceremonial call of welcome to visitors onto a marae; metaphorically, an activity to greet each other and ascertain who parties are and the reason you are there
kōrerorero	conversation, discussion
kupu whakaae	agreement, consent
mana	integral value of someone
māngai	mouth/speaker, barrel of a gun; metaphorically, the good *and* harm of what we and clients say
ringa	hands, weapons; metaphorically, the good *and* harm of what we and clients are capable of
tangata Tiriti	New Zealanders of non-Māori origin who have a right to live New Zealand under te Tiriti o Waitangi
taonga	treasure
tauiwi	foreigner, non-Māori
te ao Māori	the Māori world
te ao Pākehā	a foreign perspective; Western culture
te Tiriti o Waitangi	the Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of New Zealand
whānau	family

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