

November/December 2011 Issue

Mental Health Assessment — A Medical Perspective

By Jerrold Pollak, PhD, and John J. Miller, MD

Social Work Today

Vol. 11 No. 6 P. 6

Social workers who evaluate and treat mental health conditions most often see clients with primary psychiatric disorders, or mental disorders that are not demonstrably caused by one or more clearly verifiable medical conditions.

For the purposes of this discussion, the term “medical condition” is defined broadly to include the physiological effects of medical diseases, substances, and neurodevelopmental disorders on the onset/timing, persistence, and/or worsening of various mental health complaints/symptoms.

Medical conditions can sometimes constitute a sufficient cause for a person’s mental health difficulties, especially when the client is from one of the following high-risk groups:

- indigent clients, including uninsured people with limited access to medical care and clients who engage in medically risky behavior;
- individuals with family and personal medical histories associated with the development of mental health complaints/symptoms;
- elders;
- people with severe and persistent mental illness;
- clients with dual diagnosis;
- individuals recently started on one or more medications; and
- people who are habitually noncompliant with medical advice.

Misdiagnosing a medical condition as a primary psychiatric disorder can delay appropriate medical care and lead to serious negative health outcomes. This error in clinical judgment may increase the risk of ethics complaints and malpractice suits on the basis of negligent diagnosis (Shapiro & Smith,