

The National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions and Professional Social Work

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A new law "the National Commission for Allied & Healthcare Professions (NCAHP) Act 2021"^[1] to regulate the standards of education and services by allied and healthcare professionals including Professional Social Workers working in the health or mental health care sector came into force on May 25th, 2021.^[1] This is an opportunity for Professional or Psychiatric Social Worker (PSWs) which can meet their long-awaited unmet need of recognition as a health care professional by Indian legislation.

If you are aware of the initial draft of the Allied and Healthcare Professions Bill 2018 which included PSWs then later removed and subsequently included after some efforts of the concerned stakeholders.^[2]

The wait does not come to an end even after notification of the Interim National Commission for Allied & Healthcare Professions (NCAHP) by the Government on September 21, 2021.^[3] As stipulated by Section 20 of the NCAHP Act 2021^[1] which has provisions for the constitution of an Interim Commission within sixty days from the date of assent of the President until the Government constitutes the regular National Commission. Act 2021.^[1]

The Interim Commission consists of eleven members, "Additional Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare as the Chairperson; one Joint Secretary each from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Ministry of Law and Justice, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship; Deputy

Director-General, Directorate General of Health Services; Member, Ethics and Medical Registration Board, National Medical Commission; Member Secretary, Rehabilitation Council of India; and Head, Directorate of Regulatory Affairs and Communication, Atomic Energy Regulatory Board. The Deputy Secretary or Director, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare shall be the Secretary of the Interim Commission".^[3]

Two professionals representing each of the recognised categories are vacant without which an effective implementation of the Act will not begin; these members shall be selected by the Committee formed under Section 16 of the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions Act, 2021.^[1] The rules don't define Professional Social Workers or any specific thing related to them e.g. educational qualifications. So, Professional Social Workers need to wait for another notification.

On May 27, 2021,^[4] the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare notified the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions Rules, 2021. Some pertinent points in the rules are:

- *The President or member of a Professional Council should have a postgraduate degree in the recognised profession. They should have an experience of not less than fifteen years, out of which at least seven years should be as a leader in the allied and*

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How to Cite the Article:

Sahu KK. The National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions and Professional Social Work. Indian J Psychiatr Soc Work 2021;12(2):71-72.

Access the Article Online	
DOI: 10.29120/IJPSW.2021.v12.i2.270	Quick Response Code
Website: www.pswjournal.org	



healthcare professions. Every recognised category under the NCAHP Act has a Professional Council to represent the profession in the Commission.

Here be aware that, fifty-six types of occupations related to allied and healthcare professions, under ten categories have been listed in the bill.^[1] Professional social workers are kept under Behavioural Health Sciences Professional categories namely Clinical Social Worker, Psychiatric Social Worker, Medical Social Worker along with other four professionals.

- *The Commission will maintain an online Central Allied and Healthcare, Professionals Register.*

Here, we have to keep in mind that, under the mental health care Act 2017 also Psychiatric Social Worker will be registered with the Central Mental Health Authority who shall publish the list of registered mental health professionals under clause (d) of sub-section (1) of section 43 and the State Mental Health Authority shall also publish the list of registered mental health professionals under clause (d) of sub-section (1) of section 55.^[5]

- *The Rules prescribe an application form for the issuance of the certificate of registration to recognized professionals. The registration fee is Rs 2,000/-.*
- *The qualifying criteria for permission to establish an allied and healthcare institution stipulate that the institution should be “within the vicinity of a functional medical college or the University and has an attached hospital for the purposes of practical exposure and internships to the students.” It remains to be seen how it would affect the already existing departments of psychology.*

The NCAHP Act 2021^[1] defines an allied health professional and healthcare professional. An allied health professional has been defined as – "an associate, technician, or technologist trained to support the diagnosis and treatment of any illness, disease, injury, or impairment. Such a professional should have obtained a diploma or degree under this Bill. The duration of the degree/diploma should be at least 2,000 hours (over a period of two to four years)." and the healthcare professional is

defined as – “a scientist, therapist, or any other professional who studies, advises, researches, supervises, or provides preventive, curative, rehabilitative, therapeutic, or promotional health services. Such a professional should have obtained a degree under this Bill. The duration of the degree should be at least 3,600 hours (over a period of three to six years).”

Unlike MHCA 2017 the NMHC Act 2021 does not specify minimum hours of supervised and/or practical training required. So, again PSWs have to wait for the rules and regulations for clarity.

Section 10 says, "The NCAHP shall, by notification, constitute Professional Council for every recognised category and shall consist of a president and members". Section 10 says, "the name of the course, entry criteria, duration and such other particulars as may be specified by regulations" further "... for exit or licensing examinations for allied and healthcare professionals for professional practice ..." means The NCAHP Act 2021 will regulate each every aspect of the professionals coming under it.

Seeing the apathy of the Indian PSWs and social work associations towards it seems indifferent; they are busy campaigning for new council etc.

Conflict of interest: None **Funding:** None

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