11.1 Introduction and Presentation of the Question

The Ministry of Defence has had its own department for corporate social work, the Defence Social Services agency, since 1938. There are currently approximately seventy social workers employed in the agency. The social work between counsellor and client is often conducted beyond the view of others. The duty of secrecy in respect of what has been told to them in confidence prohibits social workers from talking to third parties about their clients. Even the fact that someone has been to see them as a client has to be protected. That is even more relevant in the case of social work in the Defence organisation, where the culture of competition and performance often leaves little margin for weakness. Much of this often rewarding but also difficult and usually painful work thus remains out of the spotlight. Good personnel care in organisations carries the obligation to offer help to personnel in problem situations. As well as solidarity with those who face problems, the need to keep personnel, particularly in times of scarcity on the labour market, is a major motivating factor for the organisation. The signal given by such help – “If anything happens to me, I’ll be looked after” – is by far the most important motivation for providing that service. A sense of involvement in the Defence organisation is a direct product of good personnel care such as this.

In this chapter, the actions of social workers in a number of practical situations are tested against the professional code for social workers. The question that serves as the guiding principle in this evaluation is: what role does the professional code play in moral dilemmas in social work in the Defence organisation? To answer this question, we will first describe some of the primary processes in corporate social work: a) psychosocial counselling, b) notification and c) advising the commander. We will then look at the professional codes for social workers in the Defence organisation. Each primary process will then be illustrated by actual cases. The names and contexts of these cases have been changed in order to protect the privacy of military person-
nel and counsellors. We will then discuss the social workers’ duty of confidentiality and the right of non-disclosure. The chapter will finish with some conclusions and recommendations on how to deal with moral dilemmas in social work.

11.2 Primary Processes in Corporate Social Work in the Defence Organisation

There are three primary processes in corporate social work in the Defence organisation: psychosocial counselling, notification and advising the commanders. The most important is often the psychological counselling, in which non-therapeutic and short-term activities are undertaken in an attempt to meet a client’s need for help. “Short term” means five to ten sessions of approximately forty-five minutes.

The primary process of notification in the Defence organisation means the task of conveying bad news to relatives in the event of the loss, capture, serious injury or death of military personnel. Advising the commander is the third primary process of social workers. This advice often concerns the individual’s fitness for deployment, often, but not always in connection with psychosocial problems. It is all about mutual trust between the social worker and the military or civilian member of staff. Apart from the professional code, more details of which will be given shortly, the primary process is only effective if the client is treated with respect as a fellow human being, his or her case is taken seriously and both the body language of the client and the response of the social worker are incorporated in the interview. An attentive attitude, the avoidance of disruptions from outside and the creation of a safe environment, especially for victims of all forms of violence are necessary but not sufficient conditions for successful counselling. Acting in accordance with the professional code is an important condition. How that is put into practice is shown in the actual cases that will be described. Before that, we will look at the professional code for social workers and the codes of conduct for military personnel. It is worth mentioning here that there are rules concerning professionally and morally responsible actions for both social workers and military personnel. These rules for social workers are referred to by the organisation itself as the “professional code”; the rules for military personnel are referred to by the Defence organisation itself as the “code of conduct”.

11.3 The Professional Code for Social Work

In the higher vocational training in social work and social services, the professional code for social work is given close attention. As well as studying this code and evaluating actual situations against it, students also look at the attitude of the social worker. It is, after all, through this attitude that he communicates his professional code to his clients, often non-verbally. The location of the session, the arrangement of the seats and every possible effort to conceal the client’s presence from the view of outsiders all play an important role in that respect. The explanation of the professional code at the beginning of the intake interview is also an essential part of establishing safety and trust. This applies particularly in relation to note-taking during the interview and the