

RESEARCH INTO *practice*

News from the Scottish Executive about research in social work and social care

No 16 – Sept 2003

What users think of the services they receive

Sixty-six service users including older people, mental health users, disabled people and members of minority ethnic communities took part in four projects set up to look at the development of user-defined outcomes.

Service users took some time to adjust to the idea of looking at services in terms of outcomes, particularly as it is impossible to divorce outcomes from the process that delivers them.

The projects, set up by the service user organisation 'Shaping Our Lives', had five meetings over a year. The first was a training session about outcomes and the aims of the

projects, constructed around a video featuring a variety of service users describing their lives and the outcomes they wanted to achieve. The second and third meetings looked at application of the ideas to people's own situations. The groups then diverged, with an older people's group using a diary to record important issues and changes, and three groups of black and minority ethnic service users discussing issues individually.

Lack of respect for service users was a key issue raised by the projects. Examples included physical abuse of people staying in psychiatric hospitals and the placing of 'do not resuscitate' orders on the notes of older patients in hospital without their consent. Some mental health service users felt their

Social workers 'need to talk about their fears'

Social workers would benefit from openly acknowledging and discussing their fears, according to evidence from a survey of social work staff.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 staff including home carers, rehabilitation officers, receptionists, residential workers in children's homes, special hospital social workers and social workers working in Northern Ireland. They were asked to talk of a time in their work when they had experienced fear. Eighty-two fears were reported.

Participants were not always sure what they were afraid of, but for the purposes of the study fears were classified as fear of assault (the main fear reported), being killed, losing control, being overwhelmed, and disapproval by seniors and managers.

The social workers appreciated talking openly about their fears in a manner that was acceptable to them. Many spoke of a combination of pleasure and relief in discovering that the experiences of others were similar to their own.

The authors conclude that the more fear is shared and debated, the more social workers can learn about it to their benefit. They recommend that further work is undertaken to build on this research, so that fear in the professional context becomes acknowledged as a reality and the need to share the experience becomes an accepted part of practice.

◆ Social workers' experience of fear; Martin Smith, Linnet McMahon and Jean Nursten; *British Journal of Social Work* Vol 33 No 5, July 2003.

knowledge and expertise of their situation was generally ignored, and some users of a subsidised voucher scheme for taxi travel for disabled people reported that the taxi company often ignored their bookings.

Each group discussed domiciliary care, an issue of real importance to most users. A clean, comfortable, well maintained home environment was important to many users across the groups. Not everyone wanted exactly the same outcomes: some were simply concerned with being able to get a service, while others focused on the tasks they wished to have done. Some were concerned about the lack of control over home care services, for example, where staff were not allowed to clean windows or curtains.

Issues around mobility and access were raised in each group, including problems with the condition of pavements and the placing of signs and goods on the pavements. Being able to get out and about was a key issue in participants' quality of life.

Day centres were important to many service users, with some considering they should be open in the early morning and evening. Older people, particularly those with mobility problems, saw them as an important source of social contact.

For many participants these meetings were the first time they had heard about direct payments. There was initially a reluctance to consider using them in the absence of sufficient information and support, there was confusion as to whether they were part of the benefits system.

In each project, the approach of looking at outcomes has led to further action being taken by the groups to influence these outcomes. Individual participants felt that involvement in the project made them feel valued and helped them to speak up for themselves.

Previous research has frequently highlighted the lack of information about services, and these projects reinforces the point that service users often cannot achieve their desired outcomes if they are not aware of the services that exist to support them.

◆ Shaping our lives – from outset to outcome: what people think of the social care services they use.

Published by Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2003;
www.jrf.org.uk

Promoting children's rights in family group conferences

Family Group Conferences, increasingly used to help make decisions about young people's lives, are designed to enable service users to participate fully in decision making. This paper argues that for children and young people, their empowering potential may be minimised by the fact that it is an adult decision making forum. It discusses the experiences of a Barnardos Family Group Conference (FGC) Project in Wiltshire, which recognises the need for advocates to support children.

The Wiltshire FGC project began with the view that if the conference is an adult decision making forum then advocacy support is vital, but ideally support should be from someone the child already knows. It was not easy for some children to identify a natural advocate, so a grant enabled independent advocacy to be piloted through training, ongoing support and payment. Eight FGC co-ordinators and two family centre staff initially trained as advocates. The paper examines the last 79 children involved in a FGC. Of these, 11 chose to have an advocate from their own family or professional network, and 51 chose to use an independent advocate.

When a referral is received, the FGC co-ordinator identifies if advocacy support is needed. If a family advocate is to be used, they are prepared for their role. If an independent advocate is identified, one of the trained advocates works with the young person. Contact varies from one to six meetings before the conference. Young people and advocates agree that ideally two or three meetings are needed if the relationship is to be effective.

The fundamental role of the advocate is to ensure the child is able to 'have a say'. The advocate therefore needs to work with the child to discover what they want the FGC to know, and agree how the information will be given to the meeting.

The advocate plays a supportive role during the meeting, for example, if the young person wishes to leave temporarily. Another key role is deciding what information to give the conference. The young person needs the confidence to say things that might hurt other family members. The advocate can listen to

'secret' information and enable the young person to put it forward to the meeting in a way that will not damage family relationships.

The authors conclude that taking into account the family and professional power dynamics within FGCs, independent advocacy should be available as a right to the children and young people involved.

◆ Promoting the participation rights of children and young people in family group conferences; Hilary Horan and Jane Dalrymple; *Practice*, Vol 15, No 2, 2003.

Assessment in a psychiatric mother and baby unit

There is a need for better co-ordination between professionals in mental health and children's services to ensure early planning for mothers with mental illness and their 'at risk' babies.

This paper looks at a sample of 61 mothers

with mental illness who were referred to mental health professionals, in order to decide whether they should remain the primary carers of their babies. The mothers were admitted to a mother and baby unit for a multi-disciplinary parenting assessment. This involved monitoring of mother and baby and routine physical and emotional care for the infant.

There were also medical and psychiatric assessment, psychological investigations, investigation of the mother's psychological and social functioning, social work assessment, review of family relationships, occupational therapy review of daily living skills, and developmental assessment of the infant.

Case notes were examined to obtain data on the pathway to referral, sample characteristics and information about the assessment process. Follow-up information was obtained from the 27 referring social services departments.

The most common diagnosis was

Counselling 'can reduce demands on psychiatric services'

The use of counselling as a way of responding to people in distress has grown rapidly in recent years. While it has proven popular with many people, the rapid growth of counselling has also generated some disquiet and numerous questions.

There is considerable debate about how the effects of counselling should be measured. Nevertheless, robust and consistent evidence about the effectiveness of counselling is now accumulating. This paper provides a brief introduction to debates about effectiveness before summarising the results of some of the most influential bodies of research. It also identifies limitations of existing findings.

Controlled trials conducted in health care settings indicate that counselling is an effective intervention, clinically and economically with costs and benefits broadly comparable to those of antidepressant medication. It is also popular with many patients. Caution is sometimes attached to the results of these trials because, compared to trials of medication, the numbers of patients are relatively small.

However, this paper argues that medical trials are, in fact, more likely to underestimate than

overestimate the impacts and effectiveness of counselling. Studies of counselling in other settings indicate a high level of satisfaction among clients. Moreover, there is good evidence to suggest that counselling has the capacity to reduce demand on psychiatric services by preventing less serious problems from becoming more serious, and by helping people to maintain reasonably good levels of mental health.

Sceptics often doubt the effectiveness of counselling because it appears to involve nothing other than 'chatting' to someone who is called a counsellor. Appearances are, however, deceptive. The communication that takes place within counselling is conducted within a very special kind of relationship. Practitioners are trained to be able to offer this special kind of relationship using appropriate techniques, but, above all else, using themselves.

◆ The effectiveness of counselling: COSCA's review and commentary. The complete article can be read on the web site of COSCA, the professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in Scotland: www.cosca.org.uk

schizophrenia, followed by affective psychosis, learning disability, personality disorder, depression and substance misuse.

In 80% of the cases, concern was expressed before the birth about the mother's ability to care for her baby. In 31 of these cases a pre-birth child protection conference had been convened, and admission to a residential assessment facility had been planned in 26. In only 20 cases (41% of those with pre-birth concern) was there a pre-birth protection conference and plans for some kind of residential assessment.

Just over half the mothers had been separated from their babies before admission, separation being much less likely to occur where plans for a residential assessment had been made pre-birth. Thirty-six of the babies were subject to care proceedings at admission, and these were more likely to have been separated from their mothers.

In most cases, social services decision-making appeared to have been guided by the residential assessment recommendations, at least as far as discharge outcomes were concerned. Excluding the 21% of parenting assessments which ended prematurely, with mothers and babies being discharged separately, the main recommendation of whether or not the baby should remain in the mother's care was followed in 88% of cases.

Other recommendations were made, mostly concerning the legal framework and the community support thought to be appropriate. Overall 44% of mothers were discharged

together with their babies and 56% separately. The discharge outcome was associated with diagnosis, with mothers diagnosed as having depression, substance abuse or no mental illness significantly more likely to be discharged together with their babies than those with other conditions. First time mothers were significantly more likely to be discharged with their babies than those with previous children.

The social worker in each case was asked to comment on the part played by the recommendations of the residential assessment, and 40 were able to do so. Of these, 32 made positive comments about the contribution and 26 considered the recommendations had clarified or confirmed their views about the case. Six considered the recommendations had played a central part in decision making.

There had been a great variation in the timing and process for a parenting assessment. Lack of pre-birth planning for residential assessment was closely associated with separation of the mother and baby prior to admission.

The authors conclude that the main factor associated with a mother continuing to care for her child was the nature of her illness. Women suffering from depression or no mental illness were more likely to be the primary carer at follow-up. Discharge under a legal framework also seemed to be conducive to continuing care.

◆ Parenting assessment in a psychiatric mother and baby unit; Gertrude Seneviratne, Sue Conroy and Maureen Marks; *British Journal of Social Work*, Vol 33, No 4, June 2003.

The Scottish Executive is keen to publicise recent, relevant research about social work. If you know about such work, please send details to the Social Work Services Inspectorate, 1F South, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ. Mark your envelope 'Research into Practice'.

RESEARCH INTO practice is published by the Scottish Executive every two months as a contribution to good practice and debate within the profession. It can be freely photocopied. Extra copies can be ordered from: Gwen Smith, Social Work Services Inspectorate, 1-F South, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ. Tel: 0131-244 3737. Fax: 0131-244 0481. E-mail: Gwen.Smith@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

RESEARCH INTO practice can also be downloaded via the Internet at www.researchweb.org.uk

Produced by Davies Communications (020 7482 8844) and printed on paper made from 50 per cent recycled waste, de-inked using chlorine-free bleach, and 50 per cent from plantation forests.



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in Social Care

Number 9, Autumn 2003

Children and young people

- www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/carezone.htm The Who Cares? Trust's new set of secure online services for children in public care. CareZone has initial funding from the Department of Health (DH) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), as well as from the Community Fund and a number of trusts and individuals.
- www.winstonswish.org.uk A site in its early stages of development which supports bereaved children and young people. The organisation also offers support and advice to carers and anyone concerned with children after bereavement.
- www.there4me.com/home/index.asp There 4 Me is a service offered by the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children. This secure website is for young people from 12-16 years old living in Britain and offers a number of ways in which young people can seek advice – for example by writing messages to trained advisors who respond online.
- www.scotland.gov.uk/pages/news/2003/02/SEED201.aspx Details of a computer literacy initiative to supply new computers for nurseries. The project is part of IBM's KidSmart Early Learning Programme which aims to provide children in disadvantaged areas with access to computer centres.

People with disabilities

- www.sclld.org.uk/ The Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability advocates for access to services and involvement in decisions for people with learning disabilities in Scotland. SCLD is involved in a project to develop local and national databases for people with learning disabilities in Scotland.
- callcentre.education.ed.ac.uk/ The Call Centre provides specialist expertise in technology for children with speech or writing difficulties, in schools across Scotland. The site provides information, guidance and resources on the impact of ICT in education.
- www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/NorahFry/ The Norah Fry Research Centre provides the Plain Facts magazine and website. It uses clear language and pictures to inform people with learning disabilities about issues affecting their day-to-day lives. Norah Fry is involved in a number of projects around information accessibility for people with learning disabilities.
- www.widgit.com/ Widgit software is a commercial company that provides age appropriate software to meet special needs. One interesting product is a software program that sends and receives symbol-based e-mails. Widgit provides accessible news and learning opportunities via a site called Symbolworld.
- www.thebigtree.org The Multimedia and Learning Disability Research Project is a joint project with Mencap and the University of East London. The 'Big Tree' website aims to become a hub for the huge amount of work in this field. One of the satellite projects is Trans-Active, an innovative scheme using multimedia to help young people with learning disabilities to communicate choices about their futures.
- www.hftctecentre.org.uk/ The Home Farm Trust maintains a computer training centre for practitioners, carers and people with learning disabilities. A key area of development is the use of ICT to create life-stories for people with learning disabilities.
- www.oneforus.com/ One for Us is a website designed specifically for people with learning disabilities. Its content, layout and language are designed to help users easily access information on housing, money, relationships and rights.
- www.rnib.org.uk The RNIB can also offer advice on computer adaptations for people with visual impairments.

●●● www.fastuk.org/ The website of the Foundation for Assistive Technology (FAST) includes a database of research projects, organisations and publications, and a user forum. It aims to encourage collaboration between users of assistive technology, service providers, manufacturers and researchers.

●●● www.abilitynet.org.uk AbilityNet is a UK charity with leading expertise in computer access for disabled people. It provides needs assessment, technical expertise, advice and support. The site has fact sheets, tips on adapting computers and links to useful organisations and suppliers.

Older people

●●● www.dsdac.stir.ac.uk/ The Dementia Services Development Centre at Stirling University. In addition to providing consultancy and advice on dementia services, the Centre undertakes evaluation research on services with a particular emphasis on innovative practice.

●●● www.ageconcern.org.uk/AgeConcern/staying_63.htm Age Concern has various projects encouraging older people to get online, including a chat room, computer training and resource guides. Age Concern has also undertaken a joint project with Barclays called Webaware.

●●● www.hairnet.org/ Hairnet is a training provider for the Government's New Deal 50+ scheme which aims to re-skill older workers. It specialises in computer training for the over-50s in the UK. The website has a large collection of links for older people, and advice on obtaining funding for ICT related projects.

●●● www.enableproject.org Provides details on the Enable Project, funded by the European Commission, which is concerned with the development and adaptation of technical products for older people with dementia. The project tests and evaluates products which help in the areas of memory, communication, pleasure and comfort.

Central government and ICT strategy

●●● www.scotland.gov.uk/health/jointfutureunit/infoshare.asp The Joint Future Unit is working towards information sharing in community care. The website contains a report by the Strategy Forum: Equipment and Adaptations which advocates a social justice based approach to the application of control systems, mobility equipment and communication equipment across health and social care.

●●● www.scotland.gov.uk/pages/news/2002/05/SEFD024.aspx The Modernising Government fund provides £30 million for projects across Scotland

which aim to improve access to public services. A wide range of projects that utilise ICT are funded under this programme, including smart cards for young people, and streamlined information sharing across health and social care sectors.

●●● www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/society/bgop-00.asp The Better Government for Older People programme in Scotland flags up significant future development in the use of new technology and sharing of information with older people.

●●● www.cjsw.ac.uk/ The Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre (CJSW) is based at Edinburgh University and aims to assist in the development and implementation of evidence based practice in Scotland. The website has a secure portal with a login for members which offers access to discussions, electronic digests, and CJSW advice.

Research

●●● www.computing.dundee.ac.uk/projects/utopia/ The UTOPIA project has been set up to research the relationship between older people and technology. The work is being carried out by a consortium of four Scottish universities.

●●● www.equator.ac.uk The Equator Research Project is a collaboration of eight academic partner universities, including the University of Glasgow, which is exploring how the physical and digital worlds interact. For example, one project aims to help people toward independent living by using technology to facilitate self-management of medication.

●●● www.fp.rdg.ac.uk/equal/ The Equal Research Network provides a focus for engineering and design developments aimed to improve the quality of life of older people and people with disabilities.

●●● www.gdewsbury.ukideas.com Although maintained by an individual, a useful place to start on Assistive Technologies. The site disseminates information on research projects being undertaken at Lancaster University and provides useful background information about the benefits of SMART technology in helping older and disabled people retain their independence.

●●● www.iospress.nl/site/html/atr.html The Assistive Technology Research Series compiles international research on this topic.

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