

Learning the Lessons of History in the Pursuit of Quality

Dr Lorna Hallahan is a manager at Anglicare in South Australia and a lecturer in social work at Flinders University. She has been involved in the disability movement for many years and believes that it is possible for people of integrity and energy to contribute to communities that welcome and honour people with impairments and those who stand with them.

The history of quality as an idea and a pursuit extends from the earliest times of philosophy and religious thought. As a starting point Aristotle on ethics makes interesting reading, but let's start this brief history of the pursuit of quality by looking at human services in England in 1849.

In 1849 a scandal broke out when Mr Peter Drouet, the operator of 'Mr. Drouet's Pauper Asylum for Children' on his family farm estate at Tooting was found guilty by a medical coroner of contributing to the deaths by cholera of over 200 of the 1400 children in his charge. (Later the Central Criminal Court acquitted him of manslaughter charges.) Various reports of the day, including articles by Charles Dickens, questioned how such an appalling loss of life could happen. Some attributed it to the greed and carelessness of Drouet although most agreed that he was, in the jargon of the day, 'farming' his children within the law. Others decried the Reformed Poor Laws of 1834 and the setting up of pauper's farms, poor houses, lunatic asylums and other asylums as iniquitous. (We can also assume that a percentage of the parents of these children were transported to Australia where a fresh wave of gathering vulnerable populations into prisons and asylums was well underway.) All the commentators concluded that the Parish Guardians, who were responsible for admitting the children to the farm, appeared to be unaware of how their children were faring at Mr. Drouet's asylum, saying: 'content with regular cursory inspections of the establishment, the Guardians failed to investigate the children's true mental and physical state.'

Since the 1850s many hospitals, asylums, reform schools, rehabilitation centres, and nursing homes in Britain, Canada, The United States, New Zealand and Australia have been reviewed and their practices condemned as inhumane. Throughout this period, as a remedy, the responsible governments have enacted legislation and developed public policies to professionalise service workers and to solve abuse and neglect in services by 'proper management.'

Alongside these civic developments there were other movements. For example, in the United States, Frederic Taylor's principles of scientific management in manufacturing emerged as influential in organisational design in the interwar period. Over the next thirty years the philosophy and practice of classical management and Taylorism, as it became known, were adopted and adapted by different types of organisations all pursuing machine-like efficiency requiring careful design and fine tuning. The new scientific management found its way into welfare and human services organisations by the 1970s with some interesting impacts, including the industrialisation of social care work and a focus on performance measurement, program evaluation, outcome standards, and so on. Some welfare historians argue that this phase of the management revolution created the formal human service system of the 1980s, even though to many of us it seems to have been around much longer.

So, with a seemingly endless supply of examples of negligence in human services to analyse, the debate about quality continues in various forms to our day.

Some individuals, governments and services see the introduction of such quality measures into human services over the past 25 years as a significant measure to prevent abuse and neglect of those who are services-reliant. Recommendations about quality are still to be found in the reports of most enquiries into

the problems with services. For example, the 2001 Australian parliamentary committee enquiry into immigration detention services refers to contractual arrangements that enshrine an obligation to conform to Immigration Detention Standards, daily performance monitoring, and quarterly formal evaluations (The committee concluded that many of these obligations were not being met, resulting in poor conditions and human rights abuses). In Australia, any organisation tendering for grants to operate a human service is required to provide detailed information to government funding authorities about their quality production, assessment and improvement plans and processes. Many large organisations are accredited through large generic quality standards systems, which can apply equally to things as diverse as the production of ice cream or the provision of acute health care services. Many employ staff whose sole or major duty is to develop policy on service excellence.

Even though its application seems almost universal, this approach has not been without its critics. Throughout this period, many writers have critiqued managerialism in human services with its language of quality consumer outcomes as a form of people processing, linked more to liability, risk management or financial accountability than to finding ways to help people live decent lives. Some advocate a return to ostensibly simpler or barefoot ways of developing and delivering services, favouring higher levels of volunteer participation, family rather than organisational governance or intentional community living. Still others argue that even though quality makes its way into the burgeoning human services industry via industry and managerialism, describing its co-option to public administration rather than social care does not do away with the necessity to pursue excellence in all that human services strive to do.

These writers argue that people reliant on services to change the circumstances of their lives need service providers and workers with heightened moral sensibility and imagination in order to make the complex value judgements required in deciding what excellence might look like. They need the courage to pursue the best for and with all people in their care. In the disability sector this has translated into increasing attention to and sophistication in ethical deliberation, principled vision-setting and rigorous evaluation.

So, despite the sorry history of welfare over the last 160 years, albeit punctuated by some glorious moments when justice and love seemed possible, many of us still look forward with hope. However, we know that the idea and pursuit of quality will not bear rich fruit in the lives of people reliant on human services when it is held captive by unjust social policies or slick, risk-averse people processing. Until quality is freed from these traps and allowed to operate as a guide to excellence, we, like the Parish Guardians in Tooting, could find ourselves completing wonderful paper work while failing to investigate the 'true mental and physical state' of those with whom we work – and thus, failing to learn the lessons of history.