

Does A Quality System Keep People Safe?

Greg Wagner is the Coordinator of Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN) a state-wide network of over 1000 people and organisations throughout Queensland who share a common vision for people with disability which includes the belief that people with disability have a right, a place and a contribution to make to the community as empowered, free citizens. Prior to commencing his employment with QDN, Greg worked in the social advocacy movement for 10 years.

The question of whether a quality system will keep people safe is a somewhat loaded question as we can make a number of assumptions about what we mean by the terms 'safe' and 'quality'. While driving home I was thinking about this question and saw a delivery van for a fruit juice company which bore a large 'Quality System' logo, stating 'A Quality Endorsed Company', with lots of those proficient-looking, red ticks down the side. I thought: Yes, that's what I want from my fruit juice – all those nice ticks. Clean wholesome oranges – tick! Friendly, environmentally-conscious fruit pickers – tick! Double-locking, safety lid – tick, tick!

Can such a mechanism for assessing quality be applied to the human service system and will a quality system really keep people who rely on services safe from neglect, abuse or exploitation? This is not an easy question to answer when we start to look more closely at this issue, and in particular, at what a quality system is and how it is administered. These are essential questions if we are to understand whether a quality system is really a safeguard or just bureaucratic smoke and mirrors.

In Queensland we are currently in the midst of the roll-out of the Disability Sector Quality System (DSQS). This new system is based on ten Service Standards, covering such things as service access, individual needs, decision-making and choice, privacy, integration, valued status, complaints, service management, legal and human rights, and staff recruitment. Within each standard a number of indicators exists to assist in gauging the level of compliance with that standard. Essentially this means that an organisation's performance can be measured by examining what it says it will do against what it actually does do. This is achieved via means of accreditation, and external assessment with the overall aim being one of continual improvement.

While I believe that the Disability Sector Quality System is a positive step forward, there are two concerns that must be addressed before there can be a clearer understanding on the question of whether the system can keep people safe.

Firstly, the system must be administered with the sole intent of creating better lives for people with disability and their families. A tick and flick exercise will not do. Services must actively and positively engage with people with disability, their families, allies and advocates and allow them to drive the changes that place emphasis on the service users. For this to occur, services should also be open to innovation, creative responses and flexibility. Should these not occur, Disability Services Queensland (DSQ) must be prepared to take strong corrective action. Otherwise, what are we left with – smoke and mirrors?

I believe that people with disability, their families, allies and advocates must also get actively involved and engage with services on these issues. For the first time in Queensland we have the opportunity to *legitimately* get involved in services with the intent of improving what they do. For this to happen however, there is a need to address the power imbalance between people with disability and services, and to offer realistic, meaningful and independent resources for people to get involved. With enormous amounts of money already being poured into services to allow them to implement the new system, a similar investment in people with disability and their allies is crucial, but yet still to be seen.

My second concern is simply that I do not believe that any quality system alone will keep people safe. This must be openly acknowledged and discussed at all levels of community and government; otherwise we run the grave risk of becoming complacent and placing ignorant trust in a system. The irony of such a scenario would be the creation of services that will get all the ticks and flicks, but still leave people in great danger.

Keeping people safe is a complex matter that involves many strategies which are built around the person given their specific circumstances. Usually these strategies involve people who are committed to the individual, and most likely these will be family or close friends. However, when someone does not have such relationships this issue gets even more difficult to address, not only from an individual level, but also from the systemic level.

We would need to look at why people have no close relationships in their lives. We need to examine what statutory powers exist to protect vulnerable people, and most importantly, we need to identify the level of political concern for taking real action when people are known to be 'unsafe'. There is no excuse for the lack of intervention when abuse of people with disability has been detected; it has quite simply been the lack of bureaucratic and political will to do anything about it.

The Disability Sector Quality System will not address this lack of will to act. For this we must look beyond the issue of quality. In particular, we must examine the underlying values our society holds for people with disability and lobby government to implement mechanisms that detect and counter the abuse of people with disability in a non-superficial way.

Quality systems can contribute to an overall strategy of safeguarding people with disability, as long as such systems are not seen as the be-all and end-all of safeguards for people with disability. Instead there must be meaningful, active and supportive engagement of people with disability and their allies in this system, and strong legislation which protects their rights, including the right to choose, and to change services when things don't work out. We must have a fair and flexible funding policy, which not only allows people to create new and personalised options of support for themselves but actively encourages and invests in those options.

Finally, we must, above all, have the political motivation and courage to act decisively when services desert the interests of people with disability.