

Quality: A fine drop of red versus entry and exit procedures

Karin Swift has been interested in disability issues for most of her life. She has been involved in various Brisbane networks for over 12 years and has a keen sense of social justice. Currently, Karin is employed as the Coordinator of Queensland Disability Housing Coalition Inc. Karin lives with her husband, David, in a lovely house on Brisbane's south side and in her 'spare' time, she is a member of management committees of advocacy organisations for people with disability in Brisbane.

This era seems to be obsessed with 'Quality', 'Best Practice' and 'Healthy-Heart Ticks'. This obsession has led to endless amounts of bureaucratic paper-shuffling so that service systems can pat themselves on the back, and families and people with disabilities might be able to have some, albeit, limited assurance that their service at least adheres to some standards. In this climate, it seems timely to ask: What does quality actually mean?

It is probably fair to assume that there will be many answers to this question as the people being asked will all have their own individual perspective. The nature of quality is complex and in our efforts to define what quality is, we may find that it defies any simple explanation.

If I may be so bold, I would like to offer my own personal perspective on what quality means to me. I would also like to encourage others to think about what quality means to them as we will all have different perspectives and it is only when we examine the places where quality may be located that we can begin to make sense of proposed quality systems, soon to be implemented by Disability Services Queensland (DSQ), and gain a perspective on how, or even if, they can be used to improve the quality of life of the people who need to use human services.

When I think of quality, the following random thoughts come to mind: doing something well and with purpose, a fine box of chocolates, a nice bottle of wine, good times spent with friends, family and loved ones, time to myself, reading a good book, relaxing on holidays, having meaningful relationships with people whom I love and people who love me, having a home filled with nice, though not necessarily expensive things.

It could be argued that none of these things have anything to do with human services or meeting the current minimum standards and that a person's life should be about much more than the services they receive. However, many of us might agree that a 'good quality' human service may play a role in assisting a person to achieve or maintain some of these things.

There seems to be a distinction between the quality of my life, or the things that I think define quality, and Quality Assurance (QA) as defined by DSQ. The DSQ definition of QA requires human services to meet ten *minimum* standards based on the Disability Services Act, and not necessarily the standard of quality I would like to achieve in my life. Herein lies the dilemma.

For me a good quality human service is one that knows what their service business is and what is clearly my business or my family's. The service is able to offer support when needed in the least obtrusive way. The menu of support is not limited to, or defined by the needs of twenty other people living in the same geographical area or by occupational health and safety regulations or by other industrial relations regulations.

For me, the people who work in a good quality human service might not be my personal friends but they would at least have enough personal interest in me to want good things for my life and want me to achieve

my best. The people working in my home would value me enough to respect and care for me and my property. They would support me with personal care in a manner that is respectful, gives me dignity and is a reflection of how they themselves would like to be treated, and especially not as a diseased organism. They would be respectful of relationships I had with members of my family, my partner and my friends. They would realise they are in a paid role to support me in my lifestyle and would not expect me to make continual adjustments based on their needs. They would realise they are working in my home, and not in a human service facility.

Surprisingly, few of these qualities are mentioned in the 10 minimum service standards. This could be for a number of reasons: perhaps these qualities speak about the essence of our humanity or the quality of our human interactions; and are simply too complex to 'tick and flick'; or to write into policy. Perhaps when these standards were created no-one thought to ask people with disabilities and families what should be included. Perhaps quality assurance processes are more suited to manufacturing factories than to *human* services.

Furthermore, can quality be achieved by services meeting an arbitrary set of minimum standards that have more to do with filling in paperwork than to the quality of people's lives? Or should quality be about going for broke, reaching for the stars, striving for Utopia, doing what no-one has yet been bold enough to try?

Something to ponder when I open my next bottle of 'quality' wine...