Inquiry into regulation of care for older people

Scottish Association of Social Work

SASW is the association for those professionals working in Scotland in social work services who register with the SSSC. Membership includes those who work in community and residential settings. The evidence provided by members is given in the context of their daily work and falls into two main categories. Firstly SASW would like to make comment about how good quality services are achieved. The second part of the evidence from members will concentrate on some of the difficulties of identifying and reporting concerns about the quality of care.

Ensuring good quality care

Good quality services are achieved by staff when a number of factors are in place. These include:

- well trained and caring staff,
- an environment where continuous learning is part of the working culture
- people are working in a healthy environment
- there is good staff care
- there are good conditions of pay that reflect the complexity of the work
- a healthy work/life balance is ensured for staff
- readily available supervision and workload management
- there is good dialogue between staff and managers to encourage improvements in service

These are all key factors that need to be traced back through the systems commissioning services as well as regulating and inspecting the services.

Identifying and reporting concerns about the quality of care

One of the issues about raising a concern about the quality of care relates to where you are in the hierarchical structure. Often members talk about the vulnerability and powerlessness they have in knowing how to report what they see on the ground. Part of this comes from the experience of past colleagues who have found themselves the ones who have been victimised for ‘rocking the boat’. If this is the case for staff then we also have to acknowledge how much more difficult it is for older people themselves, their friends or relatives to raise these concerns. This is an issue we have begun some discussion with the regulatory and inspection bodies about in the past year. However we must acknowledge that this is a very longstanding problem in social work services where personal and intimate care is given. The many complex issues range from identifying the poorly resourced care providers who cause harm through inadequacy or neglect through to the criminal acts of some care providers who knowingly seek to cause harm to people, in this case the use of power and control is a very difficult force to speak out against.
The current UK government website gives some help and advice to potential whistleblowers and spells out the employee’s duty to report harm, but the reality for practitioners is often a very scary road on which to embark. Sadly, evidence from previous whistleblowers has been that they are often the ones who are victimised. In our own association we offer Advice and Representation to members who seek to do their duty. Our experience in supporting them as individuals would suggest this is a precarious path for any professional to take. It is easier if it is a group of staff working together, supporting each other but even so it can be a very difficult path to tread.

In discussion with the inspectors and regulators we are hoping to find ways forward to make sure that staff can safely report concerns about the quality of care in older people’s services, but we have to remember that this is a very long standing issue that we have been trying to resolve for many years, we have to make sure that any intervention in people’s lives is done with respect and dignity; and a balance has to be struck between effective inspection and over intrusion into people’s privacy.

**Conclusion**

Ensuring that the regulatory system sees that the care services for older people are providing good quality and appropriate care is a highly complex task. There have to be enough regulators and inspectors and there have to be enough unannounced visits to make sure that services are providing the quality of care that is required. They have to listen carefully to residents, relatives and friends, staff and managers. They have to listen for the signs that all is not well. People will speak out louder when they feel safe. We are looking forward to continuing our dialogue with the regulators about how complaints and whistleblowers are heard. However we consider that the key to good quality services is in making sure that the right conditions exist in the first place to prevent harm being caused by poor quality care provided by inadequate resourcing.

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