

Abuse of People with Learning Disabilities: **Everyone's Responsibility**

Rachel Davies, Ruth Northway, Rob Jenkins and Ian Mansell report on a 2 year study into the issues surrounding the 'Protection Of Vulnerable Adults'



'A great deal of most useful information, presented in a readily accessible format'

'A very informed package, nicely presented'

'I find the course thought provoking and informative'

This was just some of the response to a recent SCOVO event in partnership with the Unit for Development in Intellectual Disabilities (UDID), University of Glamorgan and the Criminal Records Unit. Events were held in South and North Wales and were open to all voluntary sector staff, volunteers and managers, in fact anyone with an interest in protecting people with learning disabilities from abuse.

What is this all about?

Many people will have heard about the abuse scandal at the Ely Hospital in Cardiff in the 1960s. A 'whistle blower' raised the alarm about several cases of abuse and mistreatment that resulted in a full-scale national inquiry. Sadly, this was not an isolated case and the next four decades were punctuated with another institutional scandal every few years. The types of abuse varied but could include physical, sexual, psychological, financial or neglect. Sometimes the term 'institutional abuse' has been used to describe a corrupt regime of care where mistreatment has become the norm.

It would be good to think that the move to community resettlement for people with learning disabilities would see an end to abuse. Unfortunately, this was not the case and cases of abuse in community settings are still occurring. What is especially worrying is that abuse can come from staff members or family members who are supposed to be caring for the individual with learning disabilities. There are many reasons why abuse often goes un-reported. People with learning disabilities may be frightened of speaking out and may think they will not be believed. Staff may find it difficult to report a colleague especially if they do not have confidence that something will be done.

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Fortunately, policies and procedures now exist to help guide staff and organisations in what they should do about abuse. In 2000 the National Assembly for Wales published *In Safe Hands*, a guidance document that has resulted in the development of regional policies across Wales. Social Services are the 'lead' agency for the protection of vulnerable adults but everyone has a responsibility to protect people from abuse and to report abuse if they become aware of it.

The Study

A research team from UDID have recently completed a two-year study into the abuse of people with learning disabilities. They were interested in looking at how the policies that exist to protect people are applied in practice. This also required looking at the training staff have in preventing abuse.

As many agencies as possible that work with people with learning disabilities in Wales were invited to take part in this study. All Social Service departments, NHS Trusts and Local Education Authorities were invited to take part. In addition, 647 organisations from either the voluntary or private sector were asked to participate.

The Findings

The study was large and collected information on many issues. What is presented here is some of the views staff hold

about their involvement in adult protection.

Focus groups gave staff the chance to share their attitudes and experiences of adult protection work. Their views were grouped into categories and each category contained multiple themes. The categories are given below, together with examples of themes and verbatim quotes from participants.

Context of Abuse

Staff felt that many things influenced the protection of people with learning disabilities from abuse. This section was called 'context of abuse' as it summed up how it was difficult to think about abuse in isolation without thinking about the way that staff work, the way an agency works and many other influencing factors. One of the themes that came out of this section was the idea of 'thresholds'. This means that when staff talked about abuse they made judgments on what types of abuse would require what sort of action, if any.

"All abuse is wrong but it just depends on what degree of abuse we are talking about and obviously there is a wide range of difference between somebody not having tea when they wanted coffee and to somebody actually getting thumped you know it is different"

Who was getting abused and who was alleged to be doing the abusing also may influence

the decisions staff make about what action to take. These were worrying findings as it suggests that there is not always a consistent response to abuse.

Roles & Responsibilities

There were many things staff did that they thought helped to protect people. Some of these were general responsibilities of all staff, such as reporting, while others were more specific:

"I think a lot of it with our job is actually educating staff so they follow the policies and procedures but also understand them fully and know when something is reportable and who to report it to"

Some people suggested that the first step is to ensure that the right sort of staff are employed. This means considering adult protection within the staff recruitment strategy, taking up references and ensuring police checks are done. Obviously the specific roles identified by staff depended on their position within the organisation. For example, more senior staff stated that they had a liaison role with Social Services or the Police in cases of abuse investigations. Whatever roles people identified they all thought it was important that there was clarity in what they were expected to do. Some people also said that they wanted more clarity on the roles of other people, particularly what Social



Services do during an abuse investigation.

Helps and Hindrances

Many things can influence the ability of staff to perform their adult protection role. Some things appear to hinder the work of staff. Sometimes people had negative past experiences of going through the adult protection system and this had led to a lack of commitment to report abuse cases:

"They tend to feel that if you have a learning disability then you are not going to win that case, all the way through and all their resources are better placed elsewhere. I think it is totally wrong, there should be adequate support for every person within the learning disabilities situation to enable them to get on with the resolution of their problem. It seems horrendous there are people out there walking around,

having been abused, still without resolution to their problem".

Resources were mentioned by many people as a barrier that can limit what they can do to help clients and can be used as an excuse for inactivity:

"If I had that situation in my house, that my husband was hitting me and, I would want him out of the house today, now this minute, I wouldn't want him out of the house in probably three to four months because it is expensive to re-home him"

Open communication and support for staff were the most frequently cited factors that can help staff to perform their protection roles.

Training & Awareness of Policies

Some agencies have an abuse or vulnerable adults protection policy but some agencies have yet to develop these. If an

agency has a policy most staff get to know about them through training. Adult protection / abuse training was positively received by most staff who had experienced it. However, not all staff had had this type of training. In some agencies only senior staff were trained. This is problematic as all staff have a responsibility to report abuse. Some agencies were training people internally while others were involved in joint training run by Social Services and / or the Police. The main criticisms of training was that it needed to give more specific guidance on what people should do about abuse and needed to be regularly updated. Some staff identified that it is not just adult protection training that was important but that all staff need more basic training in order to improve the way they work:

"there is not enough training in this for people in these jobs with vulnerable people".

Improving Protection from Abuse

Not surprisingly staff had a lot to say about how people with learning disabilities can be better protected from abuse. Several people identified that the biggest challenge is how to balance the safety they offer to people with learning disabilities while creating the freedom for people to live independent lives.

Some suggestions related to things staff and agencies could do differently (e.g. promote

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awareness of abuse to more people, understand about whistle blowing) and others that related directly to the people with learning disabilities themselves (e.g. encouraging people to be able to speak out). Some staff felt that people with learning disabilities would only report abuse themselves if they had an independent voice to speak for them, especially when it may be difficult for them to speak up for themselves:

"Advocate can attain a level of trust with clients and support and represent that client using what they are saying then, I think an advocate's role is central to that person's confidence in protecting

themselves and make sure these things are not repeated".

What Next

The research study resulted in over 30 recommendations that emphasised that everyone has a role from governments and policy makers to individual staff members. One of the main recommendations was that awareness of the abuse issue and training in what to do about it should be made much more widely available. This was backed up by participants at the SCOVO events who wanted training on many aspects including: preventing abuse, identifying abuse, whistle blowing, legal issues, vulnerable

adults abusing each other, abuse policies and procedures, supporting people after abuse.

UDID will be developing seminars in 2005 that will cover some of these issues. If you are interested in being kept informed about these developments, or want further information on the study, then please contact Dr Rachel Davies, Research Fellow, UDID, School of Care Sciences, University of Glamorgan, Pontypridd, CF37 4DL. Email: rsd Davies@glam.ac.uk. Telephone: 01443 483135

Authors: Rachel Davies, Ruth Northway, Rob Jenkins, Ian Mansell

SCOVO: The key resource for learning disabilities

Our mission:

SCOVO, as the collective voice of the voluntary sector, seeks to promote the right of people with a learning disability to have valued lives. We:

- Work in partnership with other organisations, service users and their parents/carers
- Campaign to help people with learning disabilities achieve valued lives
- Support the voluntary sector and its interests
- Provide and promote good practice

Whether you work for a voluntary organisation or statutory agency, are a person with a learning disability, a carer or advocate, SCOVO has a range of services to help you including:

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- **Website:** www.scovo.org.uk. Updated weekly. It includes member details, latest news, a direct payments page and links to relevant consultation documents.

- **Information enquiry service** – for your individual enquiries
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