

Changing perspectives on consumer involvement in mental health

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Historical Perspective on Consumer Involvement in Mental Health

In Australia, the 1960s and 1970s

saw the deinstitutionalisation process begin and gain momentum, culminating in the 1980s. Running parallel with this was the creation of, and nurturing/empowering of, the first consumer activists and advocates in the early 1980s. Into the 1990s there was a concerted effort to engage representative state and territory consumer and carer organisations. This was matched by Commonwealth Government initiatives to formulate mechanisms to respond and create consumer-friendly policy directions and provide means to ensure integrity of the representative voice. These were enshrined in the National Mental Health Strategy, through which the National Community Advisory Group and State Consumer Advisory Group gained momentum to a point of real influence and improved service and policy frameworks. This was definitely the high point which lasted for five to six years from 1992 to 1997/98.

When the Second Mental Health Plan (Strategy) came about, the mechanisms which drove it changed, as did the commitment of State/Territory and Commonwealth Governments. Gradually over the ensuing five years the determination of this means of hearing the consumer voice completely and irrevocably changed.

Parallel with the demise of this representative process was the rise of the National Mental Health Consumer

Network. This network was realised in 1996 and it was eventually funded and continued to work dynamically and effectively until its demise in 2009. Efforts to have a replacement representative organisation for mental health consumers have not yet been rewarded by the Commonwealth Government.¹ We hold much hope that the promises by Government officials in 2008-9 regarding commitment to such an organisation being funded into the future will be made good by current Ministerial goodwill.

Current situation

Consumer activism arising from the deinstitutionalisation era (1970-1989) was driven by the need for advocacy and rights awareness and protection.

From 1990 to 2000, consumer engagement incorporated the original advocacy rights perspective but grew to include understanding of representation and the need for participation and equity.

2001 to the present saw changes which saw a much more "sophisticated" style of participation and an increase in "development" opportunities for consumers. There was, for some, an increased change to be "paid" to represent the consumer perspective. Ironically, along with these increased opportunities there came to be serious issues with the intensity and quality of some who spoke on behalf of others. There were, and are, many who were either disempowered or disenfranchised by other peers who lacked the necessary discipline or essential humility to be truly representative or even-handed in sharing roles. Along with all of this came a point where "preferred consumers" were being "hand-picked" by agencies who needed a consumer representative. This has meant that:

- some of us are picked because we are "tame" and will "go along" with

whatever is said and done

- others of us are greedy to get "the money" and take on any/every role that pays its representative whether or not we have an interest in the particular topic
- again others of us are picked to "represent" because we are known and it's easier to pick us because we are a "known" element.

In summary, I see the last decade as one of frustration, slowing down and watering down of the ground gained for Australian consumers throughout the 1990s. There is much room for growth, development, unity and a regaining of dynamism in the Australian Mental Health Consumer Movement through the next decade. The few hopes for us

lay in the development of some new impetus and initiatives

- around local groups who are forming fantastic new and revitalised consumer groups and engagement.
- around the possibility of the funding of a new National Mental Health Consumer entity sometime in the near future
- around the small national peer worker/consumer managed services sector where service innovation is exciting and the way of the future.
- around the development and instruction of a curriculum for certificate IV in Peer Work (mental health) – currently expected to be rolled out mid-2017.

Janet Meagher has been a Mental Health Consumer activist and advocate for over 25 years. She has lived with schizophrenia since early 1970s.

¹ However, in the 2011-12 Federal Budget it was announced that through the *Leadership in Mental Health Reform initiative* funding will be provided to create a new national mental health consumer representative body.

