

An analogy for accountability¹

Another way of thinking about accountability is to use the analogy of a car.

User involvement aims for a positive and respectful partnership between health and social service staff, and users, carers and the public. If there is no attention given to accountability in the partnership, it is like being in a **car without a steering wheel**. It may have a motor to run it, a fuel tank that can be filled and windows from which to look at the territory as you travel. It even has a map so it can go in the chosen direction. But without a steering wheel it has no ability to move through the territory and spend as long or as short a time as it wants in any one place.

When there is no accountability, these sorts of things happen to users, carers and the public in user involvement work:

- User consultants arrive at meetings to find that things they planned to address have been removed from the agenda and other priorities have been established

¹ This explanation is drawn from Kathleen Stacey's work on accountability in consumer participation published in ARRTS (2002).¹

- People that user consultants need to speak with are unavailable or have 25 reasons why they can no longer support them, deliver on a promise or be involved
- User consultants are included in processes begrudgingly, then disregarded or put down - no action is taken to address the inappropriate behaviour of health and social service staff who do this
- Staff override decisions that were reached on the basis of consultation and discussion, often with a wide range of users, carers and the public
- Action to be taken on the basis of decisions that were made previously are ignored or put off - sometimes indefinitely
- Matters of limited importance are given to user consultants for decisions and the 'real' business is decided elsewhere
- User consultant proposals do not receive timely responses
- Information user consultants need for full involvement is withheld, limited or difficult to get
- Proper credit is not given to user consultants for their work on a project

When these things happen, user consultants start to wonder what they are doing in the situation. They may have been

provided with a car as a means of involvement, but someone else is:

- driving it
- slipping them quickly around the rough patches in the road
- holding them up in unexpected road works
- changing the signal sequences and speed signs
- hiding the turn-offs
- moving or removing the signposts

Empowerment is becoming a faded dream as their efforts to act on their power are blocked. This car is not taking them where they had hoped to go. They are disappointed, frustrated and angry.

User involvement without accountability compromises the three forms of empowerment discussed in Unit 3: Part A.² User consultants may have some '**power to**' participate through getting resources and information and be involved decision-making processes. But they have little '**power over**' the control of these things. They certainly have no '**power from**' ability to resist doing what staff decide must be achieved - even if they do not agree. It is vital that health and social service staff

members examine and challenge how power works in relationships during user involvement work. This is about accountability.

A group who tried to involve patients in nursing practice in the UK said:

“Regardless of the methods chosen to involve patients, any such involvement poses the question of how much power is relinquished by those who currently hold it. The equalising of power structures previously skewed in favour of the professionals produces an enormously varied range of responses from both parties, yet opens up immense positive possibilities for the future.” (p.4)³

Power does not have to be owned and divided up between people. It can be shared. When this happens accountability is easier to look after.

Let's go back to the car. The **steering wheel has been installed** and it is firmly in the grasp of user consultants. They may invite health and social service staff to drive with them, even steer at times! In fact, the car may be seen as a joint resource. Its destination is based on mutually agreed goals.

User involvement is like going on a long road-trip. Despite the strength of the relationship when you start, you know hiccoughs will happen and negotiation will be required. Getting to your destination will be a test of commitment, patience and integrity.

References

1. ARRTS (2002). *Unit CHCMH5A: Work with other services*. Adelaide: Australian Remote and Rural Training Systems.
2. Salzer, M. (1997). Consumer empowerment in mental health organizations: Concept, benefits and impediments. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, 24(5), 425-434.
3. Wright, S. (1995). *We thought we knew...Involving patients in nursing practice: An executive summary*. London: King's Fund.