



Good practice 5: Making sure everybody has a complaints buddy

It is disheartening to reflect on the time I invested in embarking on this process, checking things out with colleagues, as well as spending each weekend with my brother when he was in The Unit. How many relatives with other commitments, or residing in other parts of the country, have such time, support or tenacity to be persistent in asserting the importance of a person's biographical life over the closed-minded 'case knowledge' so favoured by some professionals? It would be difficult to imagine a more obstacle-strewn course than the one that we faced.

(Flynn 2004 p 43)¹

This idea of a **complaints buddy** was first raised by the groups of people with learning disabilities with whom we consulted. They described a complaints buddy as being somebody who could look out for the person unable to articulate their own complaint and take action on their behalf. This could be a family member, a friend, another person with learning disabilities or a paid worker but all would need support and resources to help them maintain a degree of objectivity and have the skills and knowledge to carry out this role.

Ideally in an inclusive supportive community, there will always be somebody there to offer this kind of support. Using the Judith Snow tool of circles of intimacy (see **resource one**) can be a helpful start in identifying the network of relationships that exist around a person from where this complaints buddy may be drawn. This may help others to decide who could take the role in the person's best interest if they are unable to independently make this decision for themselves. It may be best to identify several people who can jointly take on this responsibility.

Family members are often in an ideal position to take this role for their relative as they have a longstanding and intimate relationship with the person. The story of Rachel (**see resource two**) gives a positive account of how a mother was able to do this on behalf of her daughter using many of the good practice recommendations made earlier in order to access the complaints procedure with a successful outcome.



Where there are no family members to take the role or the family feel the need for added support and resource, **circles of support** can sometimes offer this kind of support to an individual.

The idea of a circle of support originally came from Canada. A circle of support, sometimes called a circle of friends, is a group of people who meet together regularly to help somebody achieve their personal life goals. The circle acts as a community around the person who, for one reason or another, is unable to achieve what they want in life on their own. The members of the circle may include family, friends and other community members and are usually not paid to be there.

For more information on circles of support visit www.circlesnetwork.org.uk

However, some people do not have family or unpaid support able to support them in this way. **Paid supporters** are often in a position of trust and relationship with the person and can see when somebody who is seldom heard has something important to say about the way they are being treated. They cannot act formally as an advocate as they do not have this degree of independence but they can have an important role in speaking up for the person, raising concerns, initiating complaints on their behalf and ultimately, if necessary, acting as whistle blower if the situation demands it.

We all depend on care staff not only to do the work of providing the care but also to sound the alarm if something seems to be going wrong.
Public Concern at Work 1997 p 3²

Raising concerns on behalf of others and, in particular whistle blowing, can be an extremely stressful task for paid supporters. **Resources three and four** give some recommendations and sources of further support for paid workers in this situation.

Other people with learning disabilities acting as **peer advocates** are also key people who can take a role as a complaint buddy for people with learning disabilities who are unable to express their own concerns and complaints independently. This is not a new concept. There is a long documented history dating from the days of long term institutions of strong relationships existing between people with learning disabilities where one acts as an informal advocate or interpreter for the other³.



An example

Getting to Know You is a Mencap project that offers short training sessions for self advocates with learning disabilities about issues faced by people with profound and multiple learning disabilities. The aim of this training is to 'engage the empowered self advocacy movement to support people with more complex needs to be included'. Currently the project is being piloted and will undergo evaluation as part of the Mencap 'Involve Me' project.

For more information:

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E-mail gettingtoknowyou@mencap.org.uk

Download an information sheet www.mencap.org.uk/document.asp?id=2356

As with non instructed advocacy there are issues to address with the role of complaints buddies, both in terms of the scope of their responsibilities and influence and in the additional support they may require to be effective supporters of their 'buddy'. In one sense, they could be seen as a form of citizen advocacy. As such there is a long way to go in making this an accessible and sustainable form of support to people who are seldom heard.

Resources to accompany this recommendation

1. Circles of Intimacy
2. Rachel's story
3. Calcraft's recommendation on whistle blowing
4. Public Concern at work

¹ **Challenging poor practice, abusive practice and inadequate complaints procedures: a personal narrative**, The Journal of Adult Protection Volume 6 Issue 3, November 2004 (Flynn M 2004)

² **Abuse in care: a necessary reform**, London Public Concern at Work (1997)

³ **Tongue Tied: Fifty years of friendship in a sub normality hospital**, National Society for Mentally Handicapped Children (Joseph John Deacon 1974)