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The NDIS – brave new world or more of the same?

The National Disability Insurance Scheme turns one this week. The scheme is perhaps the biggest shake up of disability policy in decades. It is certainly on the same scale as Medicare in the 1970s. In essence the NDIS aims to provide more choice and control in the hands of people with disability and families to purchase the supports and services they need. After a needs assessment with a planner, the person is allocated their funds and then has the freedom to choose their providers. These are noble aims given the history of disability services based on charity and medical models where the person is pretty much disempowered. The NDIS was driven by a powerful social movement of people with disability, families and advocates and has the potential to recraft power relations and put control firmly back in the hands of the person with the disability.

But old models die hard. Already we see media stories of NDIS funds being “wasted” on i-pads, gym memberships and decking (ABC News on line, 30/6/14). These stories drawn from submissions to the Joint Standing Committee on the NDIS, already indicate a creeping of control away from the person. For a young girl with Down syndrome an i-pad greatly improves fine motor skills and allows her to communicate with those around her – in short it can give her a voice. Going to a regular gym can improve physical strength, mobility as well as providing opportunities for connecting to the community.

The NDIS has been rolled out at a cracking pace – perhaps too fast for the sector to keep up with the changes. But for many it has been life changing. Like Ian a man with intellectual disability from the Hunter Valley, who for the first time in his life has some paid hours to help him with money and daily living. “This has made things much better – it’s really good” he said. The NDIS will bring assistance to thousands of Australians who have simply missed out under previous policy and programs.

So what are the main concerns that need addressing in rolling out the scheme across the country? The NDIS’s fundamental assumptions are solid – it is the implementation that needs fine tuning. For example, the scope of the scheme is enormous – there is a real urgent need for capacity building on all fronts. The sector needs thousands more workers (about an extra 15,000 in Queensland alone) – where will they come from and how can they be trained?

People with disabilities and families need support to take up the options NDIS offers. They need more information about what is available, how it works and what their options are. Self direction means taking control and managing your own supports, all of which requires confidence and a degree of knowledge and skill. This is certainly possible for many but not

every person with a disability wants to undertake this task or is ready to do so. The scheme also seems to be heavily bureaucratised, again a barrier to many people.

The NDIS already is under budget scrutiny and will continue to be so in the current political and fiscal climate. If funding becomes more limited the danger here is that supports will be rationed, constrained and underfunded. Under these conditions, older models will resurface and true innovation will be smothered.

It was disability based social movements that achieved real positive change for many people with disability. Such movements were the impetus for inclusive education, closing institutions, community living and the NDIS. I would argue we need to keep these movements alive more than ever. The battle has been won in getting an NDIS - a major achievement in funding reform. However, we need to stay vigilant and ready to continue to strive for the wider goal of true inclusion and citizenship.

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