

Angels v stairlifts: how can we improve the image of social care?



Tony Hunter
Chief Executive
Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

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I recently told someone that I work in social care. She said: “*What’s that?*” You wouldn’t get that with the NHS, would you? And really there’s now no excuse. Social care was mentioned in Prime Minister’s Question Time throughout January when the NHS made headlines. Hopefully the press and more of the general public seem to be ‘getting it’. This makes it even more compelling for us to come up with a narrative for social care. Because at the moment it doesn’t trip off the tongue.

Social care: A new angle on angels?

I say that because some of you may remember the TV programme Angels from the 70s and 80s, which showed nurses as wonderful people, absolutely committed to helping people get better and feel good about themselves. So nurses are angels; are we in social care just seen as solely providing stairlifts to help people get out of hospital?

Those of us working in social care are increasingly broadening the definition. We’re using the term ‘social care’ less and the term ‘care and support’ more. So it’s actually less likely that we will have one unified vision, definition or brand. But too often it’s easy to think ‘service-first’ and not ‘person-first’. We don’t always look at care and support as an approach, or as a process for working with a person with care and support needs to identify their goals, priorities and strengths; and then agree on how the barriers to achieving these are best removed.

Using skills in communities: the gardening story

We need to tackle the paternalism that bedevils some traditional forms of care. And one way to do this is to embrace what we call strength-based approaches. A wordy phrase, I know, but it means asking what people can do rather than looking purely at their ‘need’. So a prize-winning gardener, who had been a teacher, found she couldn’t work outside any more. The answer? Instead of being taken away from that situation, she supervised young people on community service from her wheelchair.

So she was injecting her skills into the community for real impact. This sort of community and voluntary effort presents innovative ways to provide engagement. And the person gets to provide a continuing contribution to society, whilst social care and health are likely to be needed much less.

There’s been a recent wake-up call about social care. It’s time to capitalise on this; and to give care and support the recognition it deserves.

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