

## **Report on Malcolm Goldsmith's talk on being supportive of carers in the workplace**

Malcolm did us a great service, opening up this often hidden topic in our world of work. Present at each talk were HR personnel, managers, carers who hold down demanding jobs, and also people who one way or the other support carers, incl a husband who wished to know how he could be supportive of his wife who had just embarked on several caring roles...

### **1 Who are carers?**

A carer is:

- A person of any age, who looks after family, partners or friends in need of help because they are ill, frail or have a disability and need support to live independently
- Someone who provides unpaid care
- A person whose role may be short-term or long-term

Carers can be

- Adults supporting adults
- Young people caring for adults or another young person
- People looking after children with disabilities, whether the carers are parents or not

### **2 What do they do?**

- Moving and handling
- Help with feeding
- Personal hygiene
- Administering medication
- Emotional support
- Assistance with life skills
- Acting as an advocate or guardian for the cared for person
- Helping them access leisure and recreation

### **3 Defined in legislation as**

People providing a substantial amount of care on a regular basis – the words *regular* and *substantial* are designed to ensure that the people doing the caring have access to what is called a “carer’s assessment”. This is the gateway to securing practical support from the statutory agencies. However, the wording is deliberately vague...

### **4 How many carers are there?**

- Midlothian has a population of almost 90,000 (latest census figures), with 8,187 people providing unpaid care – i.e. nearly 10%
- Edinburgh region: 38,876 people considered themselves to be unpaid carers, but the real figure is probably much higher
- Scottish Executive funded *Rural Voices Initiative* to assess the number of carers in Wigtownshire (Stranraer) when it comes to caring for people with drug misuse. Family Support Group did the work. Scottish Executive officials came up with a figure of 9 carers; but the Support Group identified over 900! A lot happens we don't know about.

## 5 36 Hour Day

- Quote from Mace & Rabins (p 99 in *'In a Strange Land'*)
- Different perspective given by Ford (p118 in *'In a Strange Land'*)
- And Margaret Jeremiah who looked after her husband who had Alzheimer's (p119)

## 6 How are family carers affected?

- Yes, there is much satisfaction involved in caring but there is a big downside.
- Have much less time for themselves and other family members.
- Usually experience adverse financial circumstances (may have to give up work or promotion, or incur extra expenditure).
- Undergo considerable stress – more likely to take prescribed medication; visit their GPs 50% more often and report higher levels of stress and physical sickness.
- May find things particularly difficult if they don't really like the person they are caring for – eg there is the temptation to become resentful.
- If not already in good health, their own condition may deteriorate.
- At some stage (and for long periods) they are likely to suffer from chronic fatigue – brought on by lack of sleep and reduced opportunities for relaxation. Significant association of depression and anxiety.
- May well experience feelings of anger, guilt, shame and despair – or overwhelming sadness. May feel misunderstood and undervalued and unappreciated.
- Their own quality of life deteriorates markedly.
- There is often an increase in family conflict.
- Can lose contact with friends and colleagues – feel trapped and increasingly isolated.
- Can feel increasingly de-skilled and mystified by rules and regulations (eg tax credit system) – particularly true in mental health cases.
- One carer has written: "As he entered the last two horrifying months of his life I could barely sustain my inner strength. I felt that emotionally I was unravelling and disintegrating. I was conscious of a void filled only with pain and terror. I entered an alien and foreign place."

## 7 How do I help?

### a) personally

- Be yourself
- Be there for them – don't avoid them
- Listen
- Be willing to be inadequate/vulnerable – we all are anyway
- Be understanding of their situation
- Ask after them (if appropriate) – remember to ask after person being cared for but don't forget to ask after the person providing care
- Recognise the pressures that they are under (and their tiredness)
- Is there any physical help you can give? Offer a lift? Do the shopping? Search out advice? Offer to sit in and give them a break? Invite them out? Give them a present of a theatre ticket and insist you will sit in for them?
- Don't take umbrage if they are curt or seem to be uninterested.

## **b) on top of the above, at work**

- The Employment Relations Act introduced some benefits for carers including a right to time off for emergencies. Become familiar with this Act.
- Carers have the right to take a 'reasonable' amount of time off work to deal with an emergency involving a dependent. This right also includes some protection from victimisation or dismissal if you take time off. However, it is at the employer's discretion whether leave is paid or unpaid. Help the carer know about the possibilities.
- Situations where time may be taken off include
  - A disruption or breakdown in care arrangements
  - If the dependent is ill, has been assaulted or been in an accident
  - An incident involving a child during school hours
  - Making longer term arrangements for a dependent who is ill or injured
  - Dealing with the needs of a dependent
  - Parental leave – more if the child is disabled
  - Flexible working – parents of a disabled child under 18 who have been in employment longer than 26 weeks have the right to request flexible working such as working from home or changing hours. Must be applied for in writing. Government is at present considering new legislation to extend this right to carers of adults.
  - NB – check whether this legislation applies in Scotland.
- Offer understanding – especially of the *effects* of caring.
- Be flexible and patient.
- Be aware of specialised help and display organisations' literature.
- For example: **VOCAL** (<http://www.vocal.org.uk/>) has personnel specialising in carers and employment. Jane Greenacre 0131 622 6666 [jane@vocal.carers.net](mailto:jane@vocal.carers.net). 8-13 Johnston Terrace, Edinburgh, EH1 2PW
- Proactively ease access to expert help. This can greatly assist the tired-out carer.

## **Q and A time included:**

How do you help a person at work who just won't talk about the situation they are in and the pressures they are under? Realise that is their way of coping, and just be there for them – eg mentioning that you understand and would like to be supportive in any ways you can, also stating that it is not weakness to take time off, that you and others will cover for them, etc.

The supportive employer gets paid back "with interest". This was so in at least one situation one of us present was aware of: a civil servant caring for her mother was encouraged to leave work early and to take work home if necessary. She did, and in fact was more productive for her employer over time than she had been before she was a carer! The employer's showing her consideration made her all the more determined to do a good job. Both parties benefited, and the cared for person of course benefited hugely.

One person commented: “As an employer, I think being flexible and making special arrangements is “worth the risk” – the person does appreciate the concern we show and gives of themselves really well when actually on the job.”