

## *New Writing: Opinion*

*Peter Limbrick*

Keyworking is the subject of the Helpful Hints Alphabet in this Issue of IQJ (*K is for Keyworking*) and I make no apology for discussing the same subject here as well. Keyworkers or lead professionals (or whatever you call them on your patch) or the absence of them, are a source of much frustration to many of us – disabled people, parents, practitioners and managers alike. The frustration and sometimes anger, comes from contrasting the general knowledge, over the last three decades or more, that they are a good thing with the widespread failure to get them in place where they are needed. Or, having got them in place in a limited way, failing to expand the provision so that they become available to all who need them, when they need them. Or, having got some in place, having to watch the project die as managers are diverted to other priorities, taking the money with them.

The problem (and I wish I could be talking about solutions) seems to me to lie in large part in keyworkers un-noticeability. While the media and their consumers can, at the drop of a hat, get exercised about a shortage of nurses, qualified social workers, teachers, probation officers, etc, we will all have to wait a very long time before we see a headline 'Savage cuts in keyworkers for disabled children!'

And yet, every time I learn about a parent killing herself and/or her disabled son or daughter, I wonder if they had a keyworker and, if not, if a keyworker might have brought them back from the brink – or halted their progress towards it. This is a big question for me because I have to assume that each desperate parent hitting the headlines is the tip of an iceberg of misery and unmet need. The man on the Clapham omnibus might be reading this (unlikely!) and be thinking to himself that the keyworker is a mere toy hammer being offered for cracking a very large coconut. But how many times do we have to learn the lesson of the immeasurable benefit of human contact? How many times do we have to be freshly surprised that a life can be turned around by a gentle touch, a warm person

with time to listen, an empathetic fellow human being who commits to being there for you while you are struggling?

I am being very careful indeed to avoid describing disability in tragic terms. This would be a gross disservice to disabled people and their families. But there is no escaping the brute fact that disability in our society brings great challenges in its wake. Challenges that many people pit themselves against and emerge all the stronger. Challenges that can also bring hardship, hostility, isolation, despair and thoughts that life is too painful to endure.

This is the context in which I experience keyworking. The keyworker being one human being who (at that time) can offer face-to-face support to another human being who (at that time) needs help. There are many strands to keyworking, but, in my experience, at its essence is one person who becomes the friendly face of the local support systems, one person who understands and has time to listen, one person who trusts and is trusted, one special person who might bring some light into a very dark place.

It is crucial to realise that the darkness can come as much, or very likely much more, from the way support is provided or withheld by our public services than from the disabling condition itself, and that consequently, a large part of the keyworker's task is to be the go-between, representing the disabled person or family to the authorities, being a guide through the confusion, trying to pull separate fragments into something more whole and unified, helping voices to be heard in the right places and doing some of the shouting and battling.

But keyworkers remain un-noticeable because they are not very sexy. They do not save premature babies with a mad dash along a hospital corridor, they do not bring sight to blind people or hearing to the deaf, they do not rescue anybody from floods or fire. Keyworking

is more of a long-term effort, investing time in building relationships, being available to a person or family in need week after week and month after month, patiently and persistently supporting people through crises and transitions, being a refuge when the world appears hostile, judging and unfair.

Keyworkers do not cure disability, they cannot conjure inclusive schools, they cannot eradicate discrimination in the children's centre, the youth club or the workplace. What they can do is become a professional friend for a person or a family who otherwise feel alone, they can be a faithful guide through the twilight, they can preserve or restore the self-esteem that we all need to enable us to cope in the hard times.

It all comes down to the keyworker being a caring human being. The problem we have not yet cracked in the UK, is how to build the army of keyworkers or lead professionals that is needed. We know a lot about good practice and we have plenty of small projects, often in the early years and often not lasting very long, but it is all piecemeal, patchy, unsatisfactory and hopelessly inadequate. There is a secret we have not discovered, a mystery we have not cracked – a very great need we are not meeting.

Will our new coalition government in England find the answer? I do not think so. Even if they bring their focus down to the level of disabled person, family and keyworker, even if they come to the view that keyworkers are a good thing, they will pass the responsibility, under their localism credo, to the local authorities and make keyworking a responsibility of local services.

The disabled person or family, when looking for a keyworker service, will be passed back and to between national and local government. They will be told by the local services there is no money available. They will be told by the government that money has been made available for keyworking. They will be told by local government that the money was not ring-fenced and, under local policy, has been used for another need. Then some bright spark will conjure the idea that keyworking could be a rewarding voluntary activity for unemployed young people! Am I being too pessimistic? I hope so.

The case for keyworking was made many years ago. We have the evidence and we have the examples of good practice. What we do not have yet is the mechanism for embedding and financing this new sort of job within our public services.