

I have worked in the disability support sector for 4 years. I worked in the DACT system and for not-for-profit service providers and for profit service providers.

One concern I have seen across the industry is the way intellectually disabled clients/customers are treated by all service providers I have observed. Service providers working to support intellectually disabled clients seem to prioritise the wishes of the parents/guardians of adults with intellectually/non-verbal disabilities. I have observed verbal abuse towards clients by their parents/guardians. There is no guidance in orientation programs as to how to handle this issue. It is common for an adult who has very limited or non-existent verbal skills and or with an intellectual disability to be under the guardianship of their parents or another family member.

Service providers seem to pander to the guardians of the client who are able to choose the service provider for their charge. The client may refuse to be shaved. The client may prefer not to shave. In my experience the service provider will try to shave the client in keeping with the wishes of the guardian. If a client will not comply with a suggestion or request by the service provider it is not uncommon for a guardian to speak to the client over the phone or present to the residence in person and verbally abuse or threaten the client. Support workers for the service provider can assist the client with making informed decisions but cannot force the client to eat, bathe, take their medication, go to work, go to bed etc. Guardians often do not seem to understand that service providers should respect the wishes and rights of everyone they support including adults with an intellectual disability.

With the advent of the NDIS guardians are able to remove their charges from services which do not seem to best fit with their family. The danger is that service providers do not feel they can intervene when guardians verbally or emotionally or financial abuse their clients because they fear losing the client as the guardian may choose to move the client to another service. I have witnessed financial and verbal abuse of mentally disabled and intellectually disabled adults by their guardians and the service provider has done nothing to intervene.

I think it is a matter of urgency to design and implement an instrument by which the interests of clients as viewed by guardians and service providers can be balanced so service providers are able to advocate for their clients when the interests of their clients and guardians seem to be in conflict.

Anna Adams