Assessment, Performance Measurement and User Satisfaction in Older People’s Services

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This programme, at PSSRU Manchester, continues to develop, viewing assessment not only as a central component from which to design appropriate services to meet the needs of older people at the professional level, but also as vital to national policies aiming to promote more efficient and effective care.

Assessment: continued problems requiring ‘large solutions’?

Since the community care reforms of the late 1990s, assessment has been viewed as an important tool for policy makers to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness in community care services. The assessment process continues to provide examples of problems, both in the way information is collected from older people and in the use of such information. Difficulties around information sharing between different professionals and omissions of important need domains in community care assessments have prompted policy makers to consider major changes to the assessment process (Challis, 1999; Stewart et al., 1999). One recent policy has been the Single Assessment Process (SAP), formally introduced in England from April 2004, which PSSRU Manchester is evaluating.

The SAP represents what the late political scientist Aaron Wildavsky (1979) termed a ‘large solution’ in public policy: the assessment process represents the decision making of large numbers of staff from diverse professional groups and represents a major consumption of human and financial resources. In contrast to innovative experiments, which attempt to improve the assessment process by, for example, providing ways for individual professionals to share information more effectively (Challis et al., 2004; Clarkson et al., 2006), a national policy seeks changes to assessment across the country. This demands that governments develop approaches which seek to change professional attitudes and behaviour. The problem with such large solutions is that changing behaviour is inherently more complex and difficult than purely shifting resources across settings. Findings from Stage II of our SAP project, which is examining the policy’s impact, are beginning to show that stakeholders have experienced challenges in implementing the policy locally. To what extent implementation will feed through into impacts for older people, in terms of the policy’s aims to make assessment more effective at identifying needs and designing more appropriate service responses, is to be explored in two sub-studies of the larger project. Data collection for these is nearing completion. See ‘further information’ for details.

Monitoring assessment: performance and user satisfaction

At a local level, monitoring the conduct of assessment is an area ripe for development, and here ways will need to be found to generate data to comment on the effectiveness and efficiency of the assessment process. Work on our SAP project has already developed a user satisfaction tool, in consultation with groups of older people, which is being used to gauge the impact of the SAP on older users. Such monitoring is crucial in ensuring that policies are tested in terms of user satisfaction – a key outcome measure for older people and their carers (Applebaum et al., 2000). Much routine monitoring has, so far, focused only on levels of satisfaction with services and the new tool provides an opportunity to consider satisfaction with the
assessment process itself (Scottish Executive Social Research, 2005). The user satisfaction tool is currently being piloted in several statutory and voluntary organisations, and as part of work within one social services authority interviewing older users to assess the impact of the SAP locally.

Monitoring assessment in this way is crucial to developing performance measurement further in terms of key outcomes. This is important, because much of the data currently used for performance review are derived from the interactions between older users and professionals in their assessment and care planning activities. However, either local data concerning assessment, care planning and review are lacking or there are challenges with design and collection. In other countries, such as Australia, more extensive data relating to assessments are available (Lincoln Gerontology Centre, 1997). In contrast, the predominant approach to measuring performance in UK social and health care is a national one, based on key indicators used to compare units of organisation. We simply do not know the extent to which, across the country, local councils are engaged in employing local performance measures and, if they are, the benefits of doing so. The links between the national regulatory performance regime and local approaches are also unclear. A three-year study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) aims to throw light on some of these issues through a national questionnaire survey in England and Northern Ireland. The study will begin in late 2006 and is designed to address some unanswered questions concerning the links between national and local monitoring and the influences on how councils are rated in terms of their performance. From this we hope to draw conclusions of relevance to not only social care but also the wider public sector.

Another, largely measurement, issue regarding the national performance regime in social care has been explored in our recent work on this programme. Despite the rationale for performance measurement, as stated in Modernising Social Services (Cm4169, 1998), being the driving up of standards ‘to match those of the best’, recent techniques do not allow such comparisons to take place. Instead, social services authorities are usually compared with the averagely performing unit. Recent work has compared different methods, including multivariate and mathematical techniques, for measuring efficiency in national performance across groups of authorities. This work has found that different methods for analysing performance result in very different rankings of authorities from those endorsed by the recent system. This is a point of great interest to managers and policy makers, where recent debate has been critical about the extent to which the particular circumstances facing ‘poor performers’ are not included in current ratings across England (Clarkson and Challis, 2006).

This programme at Manchester will continue to develop measurement approaches aimed at investigating how changes to assessment can produce gains in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. Data collections are planned, or already underway, to explore the links between assessment and the appropriateness, timeliness and efficiency of care to older people – important dimensions by which to judge performance, both nationally and locally.

References


Lincoln Gerontology Centre (1997) Aged Care System Study: Twenty First Progress Report, October 1997, Volume 1, Lincoln Gerontology Centre, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria.

