

Bring on the volunteers

How to commandeer the membership of existing organisations for social work, by Dr Jon Garvey

MY NEIGHBOUR John has a black retriever about as big as a medium-size wolf, and called Crunch. This, associated with the fact that I am taken for walks by an extremely foolhardy mongrel apparently intent on antagonising this creature, has meant that it took a long time for me to get to know my neighbour.

From snatches of conversation shouted above the growls and snarls, it eventually emerged that John was something to do with social work. I did not realise until much later that he has, in fact, originated a quietly revolutionary scheme for community care in Chelmsford, which is now being imitated all over the country.

John came into the social services as a liaison officer, whatever that means, from the big bad world of industry. He has never, therefore, been overly impressed by the school of opinion which says that only experts in social science can care for people.

When he looked at the problems which arise in urban areas, and which the social services are asked to deal with, it became clear that most of them are so straightforward that to use highly-trained personnel to deal with them is a waste.

Nevertheless, these problems are so numerous that no organisation of keen voluntary workers can hope to cope. For example, who is to collect a prescription for a housebound octogenarian when the doctor has called?

I've had to ask district nurses, social workers, Help the Aged, and who knows who else in other towns. Who's going to transport an old fogey to the chiropodist to get her toenails cut? The ambulance service? Hardly.

How does a mum find someone to look after her daughter, in bed with measles, while she takes her brother to casualty to have his head stitched, if the neighbours are all out?

John concluded that the best way to arrange it was to commandeer the membership of



already existing organisations, and persuade them to allow their names to go on a register of those who would be willing to help out if the need arose.

To this end he started to canvass all the various groups in the neighbourhood of Great Bad-dow, which was at that time (1975) a rapidly-growing area with great needs, and also happens to be where John lives.

The churches were easy to persuade, with the exception of the Mormons, who were presumably too busy with their own programme of community visiting.

It was more difficult to get the political parties to combine their efforts, until he pointed out how bad it would look if the other parties participated and they did not.

After that came the horticultural association, and even the local pub darts club — in all, about two dozen local organisations.

A public meeting was called, and after explanation of the scheme, volunteers were asked to give their names.

One of the local GPs shamed dozens into joining by crying enthusiastically that he knew his patients would fall over themselves to join, because he knew what a caring lot they were... in this way, a register of several *hundred* volunteers was assembled.

In the first year, there were 84 urgent calls for help, from doc-

tors, social services, or the public themselves, which meant that nobody was being asked to give more than an occasional commitment.

At most, they might be approached two or three times a year. Since the best helpers are often the busiest people, this makes participation possible for a far greater number of people.

The calls are channelled through two co-ordinators, who are chosen by a committee formed of representatives from each participating organisation. Funds for administration and for third-party insurance for the volunteers come from one annual fund-raising event, and occasional donations from the clubs.

Let me give a couple of examples of the sort of thing that can be, and has been, done. A young widow, with children aged five and two, was badly scalded on her legs. After treatment in

Just one GP shamed dozens into joining

casualty, she was discharged to the care of one volunteer, with her children going to two volunteer neighbours for three weeks. The alternative would have been to put the children into temporary care in a children's home.

Owing to a fault, there was a temporary interruption of gas

supply to an area full of old people. Within an hour or two, a number of volunteers had been mobilised to call from door to door and get the occupants to check their pilot lights and ovens.

I myself have been able to avoid admitting an agitated, lonely lady under section by getting volunteers to call and support her over the crisis period.

There are four other schemes now, in other areas of Chelmsford, and as I mentioned initially, other towns are beginning to pick up the idea. It appeals to me because it's cheap, effective, and easy to use.

But I feel it has in addition one even more important feature. Without putting pressure on people to be do-gooders, it is enabling them to express simple neighbourliness.

If this sort of scheme became widespread — and an established GP could easily set the thing going — who knows?

It might help to reverse the trend towards alienation and social isolation, which have become so much a feature of our high-density, low-community nation. And if my friend John could start *that* ball rolling, I'd even forgive him his thug of a dog.

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