

Personal Budgets Story - Mental Health

TONY'S STORY...

Tony Bennett, aged 53, is a carer for his father, Dennis Bennett, who has Alzheimer's disease. Tony - plus his wife and two children - moved in with his father in Friskney, Lincolnshire to care for him.

My mother, who also had Alzheimer's, had to go into residential care. This left my father on his own in the house. The local authority was able to provide him with social care in the form of meals on wheels. Frankly, I just didn't think the service was any good. What happens is the local authority contract with a provider of frozen meals which are delivered once per fortnight. A care provider then sends care workers to the house to prepare the meal.

They are allowed 20 minutes to prepare and serve a main meal and dessert, and prepare a sandwich for tea. In the mornings they make cereal, toast etc. from food which we had to ensure was available in the house. All they are able to do is more or less put the meal in front of people and leave. I felt the meals on wheels service was not worth the money. It seemed as though the carers would deliver the meal, and

then leave. Sometimes they did not even turn up. It was usually microwave food, which my father did not eat. My father often lived on crisps, chocolates and yogurt. Plus, he did not like eating on his own. Don't forget he'd been with my mother for forty years. Suddenly he was having these strange women in his house. I thought the service was an absolute waste of money.

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So I took the decision to move in with him in, and dispensed with the service provision he was having. I rang up the local authority and had quite a tussle. We said 'we are caring for our father, what is it that you can do for us?' Later a social worker rang and said they had a system of personal budgets on offer. He asked whether I would like to meet with him to discuss it.

The social worker explained that my father could be allocated a certain amount of care money which I, as his carer, would decide how it be spent. Together we went through an assessment form and decided on my father's needs and the outcomes we wanted. Fortunately, I have dealt with needs and outcomes in my business, so it was no problem for me. We agreed a care plan, and this centred around respite care. What we needed was day care for my father. We would look after him during the evenings and weekends. Respite care was good for my father because it would get him out of the house, and it was good for us because it gave us a break. It's very difficult caring all the time for a person with Alzheimer's.

In all, it took 10 days from first seeing the social worker to him returning with details on the amount of money we had been allocated. It was all means-tested. We were to contribute £72 for four weeks. And the local authority was to contribute £302.61 for four weeks.

From here, it was a question of finding out how much you can actually buy with your pounds. I was able to wrap this up in a matter of days, as fortunately the home my mother was in agreed to look after my father during the day.

The system of personal budgets felt like we were being given money which, otherwise, we would not have had. People with Alzheimer's don't have many needs as such - they just need to be cared for. Personal budgets gave us an opportunity to have the money in our hands and then look for value for money. Sure, the social worker would have helped us if needs be, but at the end of the day it was up to us how we spent the money. I might have decided to employ someone two hours a day to sit with my father at home. Personal budgets allow carers to weigh up different forms of care delivery. I decided I wanted to keep it simple.

I am not the kind of person who feels intimidated by getting on the phone and agreeing care prices and times. But if it had been left to my mother, for example, she would have found the process difficult. She's not used to having to organise such matters and would have struggled with duties such as setting up a separate bank account. I can see the whole process being onerous for some people. But social workers are the gateway, and they can be

advocates for carers who need extra support. The social workers' role might have to change.

No two people with Alzheimer's are the same – the rate of deterioration is different. You can not plan ahead. If people's circumstances change, it is then about carers, social workers and psychiatric nurses being nimble enough to recognise the signs, and being flexible enough for care plans to change.

Without personal budgets my father was offered home care or a day centre - that was the only provision the local authority had for people in my area. As I see it, personal budgets are so much better and value for money than having to throw uneaten meals in the bin! It was such an improvement.

And it does make you sit and think about how you, as a carer, should spend the money. This is a good thing. With personal budgets it is service users and their carers who make the key decisions and consider what are a person's best interests.

As told to Adam James.

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CSIP is grateful to the people and families concerned for sharing their personal stories.

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