

Friday, April 28, 2017

## Communication and collaboration in working with sexual abuse

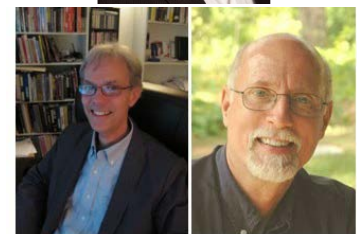
Kieran McCartan, PhD, and David Prescott, LICSW

Over the last couple of months, we have participated in conferences, meetings and collaborations in our home regions of the UK and US as well as abroad (Netherlands, Latvia, Australia, Canada, Germany, Romania, Namibia); a central theme in each location has been that collaboration is the key to working in the field of sexual abuse. We have been amazed by how this most simple aspect of our work is often the most challenging; one would think that something as simple as collaboration would be easy to achieve, but this is not always the case!

Despite our field's progress with assessment and treatment technology, we are all still human beings for whom miscommunication can come quite naturally. Collaboration may be the most important tool we have, and perhaps the least expensive, and yet it is highly dependent on the capacities and interpersonal skills of those who engage in it. Sometimes, we forget to simply pick up the phone and contact people.

Collaboration is vital: we work in consistently changing environments with practical challenges and related issues. For instance, in the multi-disciplinary/multi-agency UK, some current issues are:

- The introduction of new sex offender treatment programmes in the UK known as the Kaizen (a replacement treatment program for high or very high risk sex offenders) and Horizon (a replacement treatment program for medium risk sex offenders) roll out.
- Upcoming Brexit negotiations and the impact upon movement, sentencing and punishment of sexual offenders – especially monitoring and data sharing.
- An ongoing conversation about how to respond to increasing numbers of online offenders entering the Criminal Justice System.



### **SAJRT Bloggers' Profile**

*Chief Blogger Kieran McCartan, Ph.D. and Associate Bloggers David S. Prescott, LICSW and Jon Brandt, MSW, LICSW are longtime members of ATSA. We are dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.*

*The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.*

*The views expressed on this blog are of the bloggers and are not necessarily those of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment, or Sage Journals.*

- 
- Evolving sex education and sexual abuse safeguarding in schools.
  - Changes to the funding of state services, like probation, and the impact that this has on the management of offenders.

However, these are not only UK issues. Other countries have these issues and more, including:

- Differences within the same country on viability of using the same sex offender risk assessment scales (USA and elsewhere)
- Getting different organisations, especially within the public health system, to work effectively together (Latvia and many Eastern European Countries)
- Getting criminal justice systems interested in providing treatment to people who have abused in the first place, when moral and religious beliefs can interfere with developing an empirically sound understanding of these individuals (Eastern Europe and elsewhere).
- Ensuring that agencies that can disseminate information that can aid in the prevention of sexual abuse and sexually transmitted infections actually reach their target audiences (Namibia and elsewhere).

All of these situations reflect a lack of professional collaboration. Often, they reflect the disagreements in the processes and practices of sexual offender management which can lead to poor practice and bad policy. Sometimes they reflect the strong beliefs – even egos – of those involved. We often say that we collaborate with others, but our practices, organisations, and/or tasks can get in the way of this. We are sure that we are not alone in having attended meetings that trumpet good collaborative working, but nothing gets carried forward as no-one is really listening. This is frustrating (and a possible compromise of public health and safety) because a lot of these issues are well within our sphere of influence to change through better, more honest, and more open communication, as well as collaboration. By working together in a more constructive, multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary we can reduce sex offending, improve risk management, improve public protection and improve the prevention of sexual abuse in the first instance... but it begins with us. So how should we do this?

- Communication with other professionals, the public, policy makers and the media. Always leave the door open and be willing to have the conversation from a place of wanting to learn, not a place of seeking confirmation of your practices.
- Actively check in with others and cultivate an openness to feedback.
- Always share good practice with others, do not be covetous of your only good practice. If something works, share.
- Debate bad/poor practice within your own work and in the projects that you are working within; don't be afraid to say that something is not working and needs to change. If there is anything we have learned from recent worldwide elections it's that we are not as effective at changing our minds in the face of evidence as we think.
- Collaborate with other related individuals within the field; this will lead to a multi-disciplinary approach that will improve the situation of everyone.
- Never, ever forget the importance of developing and maintaining professional relationships. As they say in David's agency, a little love can go a long way.