



Angela Dew

Senior Research Fellow
Intellectual Disability Behaviour Support Program
UNSW, Sydney

<https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/research/intellectual-disability-behaviour-support-program/>

■ a.dew@unsw.edu.au

Next year I'll have been working in the Australian disability sector for 38 years. I arrived from New Zealand in 1980 with an undergraduate degree in Sociology and my father's words ringing in my ears: "What job are you going to get with that?" My first 'proper' job in Australia was as a Field Officer with the Royal Blind Society in Sydney. The grounding I received there has underpinned my subsequent work. By way of induction, I spent two weeks wearing a blindfold while engaging in high risk activities such as navigating the escalators at Burwood shopping centre, chopping up fruit and vegetables, and operating a talking book machine (the latest technology in those days!) A naïve 20 something, I took these experiences with me as I visited people in their homes to give them advice and equipment to help them adjust to life with restricted vision. Subsequent jobs brought me into the intellectual disability field at a time of enormous change with deinstitutionalisation and normalisation revolutionising the disability landscape. It was an incredibly exciting time to be working in the sector. After two decades as a practitioner and service manager, I returned to study completing a Masters in 2005 and a PhD in 2011.

The highlights of my career have undoubtedly been the people I have worked with – people with disability, family members and colleagues. One highlight was helping arrange the wedding of a couple who moved out of Marsden Rehabilitation Centre into a group home in the late 1980s. Their wedding was a joyous occasion, but it also challenged the thinking of many who questioned their right to 'tie the knot'. Another highlight was completing my PhD aged in my early 50s. My PhD identified the importance of reciprocity in adult sibling relationships where one sibling had cerebral palsy and I met the most amazing brothers and sisters. Given that most of the sibling literature was focussed on the burden of having a sibling with disability, I was proud to contribute the viewpoint of participants with and without cerebral palsy who spoke about their shared, life-long relationship as providing each of them with strengths, values and skills beyond those typically identified. Further highlights were the experiences I had conducting research in rural and remote areas of NSW and Central Australia including with Aboriginal communities. Throughout the four years I was project manager for the intriguingly named 'Wobbly Hub and Double Spokes' project at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, I went to places I'd never visited before and met the most inspiring people who demonstrated the celebrated Australian bush resilience and humour despite significant challenges accessing services those in the city take for granted. More recently, I have expanded my research repertoire by introducing arts-based methods which enable the participation of people for whom traditional research approaches may be difficult. Along the way, I have been very fortunate to work with, and be mentored by, some of Australia's top disability academics and, in turn, I have mentored colleagues and supervised excellent students.

My early career as a practitioner - and inheriting my practical father's genes - means my research is focussed on changing practice. The Wobbly Hub work resulted in a model of rural and remote therapy service delivery adopted by the then Western NSW Department of Family and Community Services to fund a range of projects within NGOs to increase access to therapy for children with disability 0-8 years in rural and remote locations. This project highlighted the benefits of funders 'thinking outside the box' to address geographic challenges. In my current position at the Intellectual Disability Behaviour Support (IDBS) Program at UNSW, Sydney, I instigated an action research approach that involved people with disability, family members and service providers in the development of a range of practice guides spanning planning, behaviour support, case reviews and use of psychotropic medications. A number of these guides are being used in training the disability workforce in Australia and other parts of the world.

A specific focus of the IDBS program is people with disability and complex support needs particularly those who engage with multiple service sectors such as child protection, criminal justice, and drug and alcohol. This is one area where change is needed to ensure that people are not further marginalised through exclusion from the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

In 2014, I completed a Knowledge Translation (KT) Professional Certificate at the University of Toronto, Canada. This course, and an ongoing collaboration with Professor Katherine Boydell a Canadian leader in the KT field, provided me with skills to ensure that translation of research into practice underpins my research approach. Identification of and engagement with key stakeholders throughout the research process is essential to ensuring outcomes are useful to, and used by, practitioners. Distilling research outcomes to focus on main messages and presenting them in accessible formats is also key to ensuring uptake. Finally, research should be disseminated through a variety of platforms and modalities to reach the broadest audiences. Oh, another great strategy is to come up with an intriguing and catchy research title!