



MY JOURNEY ALONGSIDE PEOPLE
WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

FROM BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

OLIVE WEBB

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CHAPTER XII

ASID

It was early in the 1990s and I was still at Sunnyside. A flyer advertising a conference in Australia caught my attention. It was affordable. It was near enough to close by. And it was focussed totally on intellectual disability.

I rushed about in a flurry of applications for leave and travel costs, and just as I was signing off on it all, I noticed that the flyer was advertising a conference for last year.

But my interest was whetted and I made it my job to find out as much as I could about the then Australian Society for the Study of Intellectual Disability.

ASSID created a focus for me that brought together my passion for research along with my passion for excellence in the support of people with intellectual disabilities. I had tried to interest august organisations like the New Zealand Psychological Society in intellectual disabilities and presented some papers at their conferences. But neither I nor my few contemporaries in the field could gain any traction.

Then I discovered IASSID, the International Association for

the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disability, and I developed a routine of conference attendances and presentations of papers throughout the world.

All the research that was being done at IHC now had an outlet. At last we could compare ourselves with research throughout the world. And, of course, we discovered that what we were finding in New Zealand was being found throughout the Western world.

I presented a paper at an ASSID conference in Fremantle. I presented my data from our medication research. I sat down and two more identical papers were presented – one from New South Wales and one from Victoria. At another ASSID conference I presented our data on the training and behaviour of General Practitioners towards people with intellectual disabilities. My data was essentially identical to those of Mike Kerr and Nick Lennox presented at other ASSID conferences.

But there was work to be done at an organisational level as well as at the research level. ASSID was the closest thing to professional organisation for people working with people who have intellectual disabilities. Its by-line, 'Research to Practice' encapsulated what we all should be doing in order to build up our knowledge and develop sound and appropriate skills to work in the area. ASSID was inclusive, and people with intellectual disabilities and their families were welcomed into the fold along with professionals and support people from all walks of life.

New Zealand had to be in this for itself, not just tied to the Australian apron strings.

We remembered that New Zealand had had a similar organisation years before (The New Zealand Association for the Study of Mental Deficiency), but those who were leading it started promoting institutions and values systems that we were trying to leave behind, and so that organisation withered and died.

The structure of ASSID copied the Federal structure of Australia. Each state was a member state of ASSID and an overarching

governance board was made up of representatives from each state. Clearly, New Zealand needed to be a member as well.

The ASSID president at the time was Karen Nankervis, and she threw herself at the challenge of bringing New Zealand into the fold. We had a few New Zealand mini-conferences to test the water locally. Then Karen and husband Bill Taylor came to NZ and personally supported our formation of a new member organisation of ASSID – the New Zealand Association for the Study of Intellectual Disability – in 2003. I became the New Zealand representative on the ASSID governing board. At the next ASSID AGM, Karen saw to it that I became Vice-President/President-elect on the Board. This ensured that after the next AGM a New Zealander would be president of ASSID.

There were no opposing votes when each state endorsed the change of name to the Australasian Society for the Study of Intellectual Disability. I have always believed that we were lucky to have a name-change that did not involve changing the acronym. That's the sort of thing that can stop developments in their tracks.

In 2005 I became President, and New Zealand's place in this great organisation was sealed.

After a few years of wrangling we agreed that to 'study' people with intellectual disability was objectifying and did not represent the way we needed to engage with people with intellectual disabilities. In 2010 we became simply the Australasian Society for Intellectual Disability or ASID. Annual conferences and events have increasingly included people with intellectual disabilities and the governance boards at regional and organisational level increasingly include people with intellectual disabilities.

ASID is a funny old organisation. It has stood the test of time, but also the test of embracing generations of strong-willed people who are not backward in expressing their views, arguing a point and ensuring that their contribution is heard, understood and taken seriously.

Like many organisations such as this, there have been fallings out, hurt feelings and jockeying for positions. But also like many organisations like this, there has been consensus about the common good, about why we exist, and why it is so important to have a group that is so diverse, but at the same time is totally committed to the best of everything for people with an intellectual disability.

I regard ASID as the home of my friends, my drinking buddies, my colleagues and my reference points – Mike Kerr in Wales, Nick Lennox in Brisbane, Angus Buchanan and Sue Peden in Western Australia, Helen Beange and Trevor Parmenter from Sydney, Richard O'Loughlan and Denise Wharldall in South Australia, Keith McVilly from Victoria, Linda Godard in New South Wales and of course the New Zealand team: Sharon Brandford, Angus Capie, Adrian Higgins, Brigid Mirfen-Veitch and so many others.