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Michael Raper, winner of the 2007 Justice Medal for his work on behalf of socially & economically disadvantaged people.

Photo: Sydney Morning Herald

COMING LAST

In the experience of many welfare recipients, Centrelink can be depended on to get it wrong, vital information about entitlements and appeals is frequently not given and woe betide anyone who is mistakenly overpaid. Yet social security was not always punitive Denny Rosey discovered. So why is it now?

My memory might be shot but I cannot recall anyone in the last ten years or more who has visited Centrelink and come away glowing at the helpful, non-judgemental, compassionate assistance they received.

The tremendous frustration, anger and contempt Centrelink arouses in so many recipients of welfare can be sheeted home to the fact that Centrelink is oriented not to serving the public but to the agenda of the government of the day first and then its own interests. The public's interests and well-being limp a long way behind.

Under the Howard government, Centrelink learned not show compassion. It still doesn't. See page 44 for an example: Graham Carman's case and Centrelink's response. There is no mea culpa.

It was not always so. Once upon a time, believe it or not, Centrelink, or rather its predecessor, was a place where people with disabilities, widows, the unemployed – mostly people in desperate need – could get help without automatically being typed a cadger or fraud.

“In the post war era we set up a social security system in order for society to carry a lot of the risk in disability and unemployment,” says Michael Raper, head of the National Welfare Right Network (NWRC). “But in the last ten years there has been a big shift in the balance of risk and responsibility. Welfare has shifted from a collective responsibility to the risk and responsibility being placed on individuals.”

He describes Centrelink as a “no care, no responsibility administrative culture. The best example of this is in the area of social security debt which is unfortunately one of the biggest problems my organisation handles. We see cases where people have supplied information about their income to Centrelink but have been overpaid. Centrelink can be

99% at fault but if they can find 1% contributory negligence from a social security customer they will seek to reclaim that debt. They could waive that debt but they don't.”

What are Centrelink's priorities – the government, Centrelink or the public?

If, as a result of Centrelink's unyielding position people become homeless because they cannot pay the rent, then too bad.

While Centrelink insists it makes errors in just 3per cent of cases, Raper disagrees. “Centrelink makes an enormous number of errors,” he says. “In order to assess whether someone is eligible for a Disability Support Pension (DSP) you have to go through a Job Capacity Assessment (JCA) and so often that process is driven by the government and DEEWR's (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) obsession with work first.

“That means they want to deny the existence of disability wherever it can

and they make sure people get put on an activity tested unemployment payment like the Newstart Allowance. Sometimes they don't even *look* at or consider the medical evidence in relation to a person's disability.

“Another structural flaw in the system,” he added “is that quite often the people doing the JCA don't have the qualifications to correctly assess a person's disability. So you can get a speech therapist assessing someone with a psychiatric disability. They are trying to assess whether or not the person's disability is the direct cause for them being unable to work but they're not even taking account of the medical evidence in relation to that person's mental illness or it's episodic nature.

“By not looking at the treating doctors' reports or not obtaining relevant medical evidence, Centrelink has a very high rate of appeals against those incorrect assessments and they have a very high rate of withdrawing appeals when they finally do look at the evidence, which they should have got right in the first place!

“We find that many people, especially young people, people from Aboriginal backgrounds and those with mental

illness, neurological and intellectual disorders, often don't feel confident about lodging an appeal. It is a relatively easy process in fact, but it does require some get up and go and Centrelink isn't good at advertising people's appeal rights, just as it isn't good at advertising a number of entitlements – so these are under-claimed and people under-appeal."

Centrelink's focus on fraud rather than peoples' welfare also accounts, Michael Raper suggests, for it not promoting the Mobility Allowance. "They are very good at getting out information about the activity requirements of the Newstart allowance and the penalties that will be imposed if you don't comply but they're not good about getting out information about people's rights and allowances, but they should be.

"Centrelink is very energetic and very enthusiastic about running campaigns on fraud," he says "but I've never seen an advertising campaign that says 'Are you getting your full entitlements from Centrelink? Did you know you can appeal?'"

The Mobility Allowance is a substantial help to eligible recipients. "The Mobility Allowance is worth \$74/fortnight or \$104/fortnight if you're under an activity test payment. It's available to people doing voluntary work or those required to look for work or are working in business services for example," Raper explains.

"People are entitled to assistance with transport. It's so critical in a country that does not have a general disability allowance to meet the increased costs of having a disability. We, along with many disability organisations like the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, have argued for a Disability Allowance but until that happens it's very important people are aware of their entitlement to the Mobility Allowance. The government should be advertising that very strongly."

(Centrelink is not alone in being reluctant to supply information. I approached three government departments and suggested they place advertisements about the Mobility Allowance in Link. None were interested. A woman at DEEWR said welfare recipients "can get that information from the Centrelink website" which assumes of course that everyone knows how to use a computer, can afford the internet, has appropriate computer hardware if they need it or can access government websites. Many people can't manage any of those things. But the DEEWR manager considered Link readers would prefer to know about the Disability Awards in any case than the Mobility Allowance! Silly me.)

Another seldom known fact is that people with illnesses such as major cancers for example are not covered by the DSP. "People cannot get a DSP unless their condition is fully diagnosed, treated and stabilised," Michael Raper explains.

"That means people with severe cancer who are undergoing chemo or radiotherapy and clearly cannot work for a time – say 6 to 12 months until they recover – need

to be able to get a temporary DSP. It's a disability support pension for goodness sake! People with severe cancer have a pretty significant level of disability and they cannot work, yet our system says 'No you cannot get the DSP, we'll put you on to Newstart and maybe give you an exemption from activity testing.'

The Commonwealth Ombudsman receives more complaints about Centrelink than other government department or agency but as Michael Raper says, that may have something to do with the fact there are about 6.5 million social security recipients.

Centrelink's performance is monitored closely by the Australian National Audit Office although this is not done annually. According to Michael Raper, Centrelink usually responds "pretty positively" and "the top leadership of Centrelink does try". He maintains, however, that in spite

of the system's complexity, Centrelink "should certainly be doing better and for people with disabilities they ought to be doing much better".

Those with permanent and severe disabilities and their carers would also like Centrelink to get its house in order and stop what they describe as harassment. "I would have thought they could grasp that a permanent disability is just that – permanent!" said one exasperated man on the DSP. "Instead I get asinine letters asking whether I'm still blind and still have a serious brain injury! One woman at Centrelink even wanted to see my driver's licence! Surely they have the means to tag people with permanent disabilities."

Michael Raper agrees. "We [the NWRC] will definitely be taking up the problem of people with permanent and severe disabilities being sent monthly letters by Centrelink to check whether their circumstances have changed. I can understand how people feel harassed and extremely irritated by this. Centrelink has a system called risk management where they can identify high risk and low risk; there is no risk with people with profound and permanent disability." ☹

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