What are the long-term implications of Covid-19 on Social Care Personal Assistants (PAs)?

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Personal Assistants (PAs) in Social Care

HSCWRU Studies

Background

- In 1996 the government introduced direct payments (DPs) and later personal budgets (PBs) in England

- Enable service users to use Local Authority money to employ their own personal assistants (PAs), rather than use care agencies

- There are about 100,000 PAs employed by for people with Direct Payments.

- PAs are unregulated - non-registered, DBS checks not required

- No professional association

- Recruitment: 77% of people needing to recruit a PA found it more difficult during the pandemic (TLAP 2022)

Objectives

This study (PA -3) is being undertaken with participants from the original sample of PAs and asks- **What enduring impacts has the COVID-19 pandemic had for PAs?**
 In particular:

1) What has happened to PAs after the height of the pandemic?

2) What has changed, if anything, in working relationships with their employer(s), their employer's family (where relevant) and other community-based professionals, and in their employment conditions?

3) How do PAs envisage their working lives in a 'post-pandemic' world – and whether / how the pandemic has shaped job and career plans.

Research design and methods

- Qualitative design - interviews seeking - facts, opinions and experiences.

- Data collection between December 2021-May 2022

- Contacted all 100 original participants (interested in reasons some PAs have stopped working), total participants N=37

- Data analysis using NVivo (v 1.6.1)

Preliminary findings - PAs in Covid-19 – phase 3

1) Experiences

Responsibilities and risks, loss, and new activities

2) Relationships and employment conditions

Changes in work levels
Work reduced – family members can support the client
Work increased - family members live far away and could no longer visit a client
Employment conditions

3) The future of PA work:
- **Regulation**
- **Recruitment and retention**
- **Cost of living crisis**
- **Training Needs**

Experiences: responsibilities and risks

[] really niggled me in this year is when you go into a client and they've got other PAs and you know that they're doing things that I wouldn't do that I wouldn't deem as safe. They're going up to London to be with family, they're going on trains, they're going shopping, they're having a normal life outside of COVID. Some of them aren't vaccinated. [] So I'm not happy about that part of it at all, I think if you're a PA you've got an obligation to keep people safe [] If I took COVID into my client's home because I picked it up on a train going up to watch a musical in the West End, I just wouldn't forgive myself - that's the hardest part of it. (PA03)

Experiences: New activities

The Zoom side of it. We've used a lot more of the technology so you can talk to people online Just, you know, when you can't go round you can actually sit there and have a really good conversation with them or do stuff with them. The isolation side of it, it's horrendous. People don't realise it. (PA12)

But we had a lot of things we did. Things like watching movies, you know? Things like that. Like pamper days and facemasks and things like that in the house. (PA107)

Relationships and employment conditions: Changed working patterns, pay, and key worker benefits

Family members became official PA during the pandemic:

So we found that when we were just operating as [name]'s family, it was more difficult to get taken seriously, to affect the care plan, to do anything really. As soon as we were enrolled as his PAs and we were officially there to care for him, we were able to have a lot more influence over his care package. (PA31)

Relationships and employment conditions: Changed working patterns, pay, and key worker benefits

PA99 was not eligible for the 'key worker' grants the government offered as she was not 'self-employed'. PA99 felt she was constantly "slipping through the net".

Interviewer: Some care workers got priority accessing the shops because they were care workers. Did you?

No, I don't know if that's a postcode lottery. No, you had to just queue like everybody else. It didn't matter. (PA11)

Future of PA work

Recruitment and retention: some people left the job:

◦ *I found the last few years absolutely exhausting. I mean, I'm nearly 60 so I'm not finding it as easy as I used to I suppose physically I've had a few ailments and things to deal with. [] I definitely think they're stress-related, I've gone a lot greyer. [...] it has tired me out and I think I'll probably look at other ways to use my skills in the next few years, probably. Or take early retirement. (PA01)*

Cost of living crisis:

◦ *I think people are going to reconsider whether they can continue to work in this area, and again, it's not because they're not committed. It's not because they don't put their heart and soul into their work. But it's not an affordable – [] you hear NHS nurses saying they [] don't work in the NHS to get rich [] But it's even worse for care workers, and in lots of ways there's, you know, there's more isolation. (PA31)*

Future of PA work: training

Training needs:

Interviewer: You mentioned your friends working in care homes. Do you think they had more training and more kind of guidance on that?

It feels like they got a lot more hands-on experience and training because it was simple stuff like when you're washing somebody, stand to the side of them as opposed to face on, to do the front, behind them to do the back. […] I wouldn't have learnt that if I hadn't talked to my friends in the care homes. […] obviously, us personal assistants would just get thrown in and told to just work it out. (PA11)

Person-centred work:

I think working for so many years and knowing the client well, the employer very well and all the needs, it was so much easier for us to see all those little things that would help to protect from the virus. So I think having the team of people who are working there for a good few years now, knowing the environment, I think it was much easier to introduce all the new procedures and following them. (PA23)

Future: Regulation – diverging opinions

Interviewer: Do you think personal assistants should be regulated more as a group, a bit like care workers and care homes are?
I think it would be a bit difficult in a way, like we work, for example, directly for my employer, which gives him more freedom, kind of deciding about his life. I think being more regulated from outside would make it really official. And it is already quite official in a way of introducing policies, procedures, having insurance and everything when you employ more than five PAs. But it's still kind of their home and because it's a private environment, I think doing it as very formal, I think it would be a bit stressful for PAs (PA23)

I don't know if it [registration] should be made mandatory, but I think it's very useful. [] And myself and my clients appreciate the fact that we, because of our membership, [of Support with Confidence] had to meet certain standards. And we have a lot more training than people from different agencies. We're a lot more knowledgeable. I think it's very beneficial. And I would encourage anybody to go and join a scheme like it. Get the training. (PA104)

Reflections

How can they become more visible or known?

Will they be included in disaster/crisis planning?

What are PA support/training needs post covid (e.g. infection control)?

PA recruitment and retention – what can be done and who needs to do it?

Should PAs be more formally regulated and better supported – at what cost?

Acknowledgement and disclaimer

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