

GARDNER, N, 2007. A friend like Henry. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

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'The remarkable true story of an autistic boy and the dog that unlocked his world'.

That's what the front of the book says! Autism is something that health and social care professionals will encounter within their careers, or should that more correctly say people with autism will require support from a range of health and care professionals. The first phrasing is deliberate however.

Although this book was published in 2007 the story starts in the early 1990s. Even at this time we were still being taught about person centred care but it was still a developing entity in practice. People would still be referred to by their condition and there was still a belief from professionals and the public that 'doctor knew best'. This is what Nuala Gardner encountered when she first identified concerns relating to the development of her baby son, Dale. The book starts with an ecstatic young couple at the point of the birth of their first child. What follows is an account of the experiences of the family as they attempted to get a diagnosis for Dale and suitable help to enable his development to progress as much as possible.

The initial sections of the book are a lesson in what we should not be doing! The book reveals the battles that the family had to undertake to get a diagnosis of autism and how difficult it was for the family to get health professionals to actually LISTEN.

Luckily for Dale his mother was a Midwife and nurse. Her insight into the problems her baby presented with enabled her to know that something was wrong and she had the ability and support from family and friends to push for what she knew her son needed. We talk about the importance of communication skills, including active listening and this book demonstrates exactly how important these skills are. It shows the destructive effect that not communicating honestly and not listening can have on individuals. Through researching Nuala was able to identify her son's presentation as classical autism. Paediatricians and speech and language therapists however disregarded this. Was this through lack of knowledge of the condition or simply because they were being challenged by a parent? This will never be known but the messages conveyed in this story are important ones for all health and social care students. Put yourself in Nuala's place and think about how you would feel in the situations she encountered. As a mother she was not being difficult, only trying to make her concerns understood and get the help she knew her son needed.

What is frightening, however, are the possible consequences for Dale if his mother had not known the system and had not had the determination to push for what her son required. Does this still happen in health and social

care today? I have personal experience of it and therefore think this is an important message for students and all health and social care professionals to understand. Clinicians should listen and hear what people are saying to them. Person centred care means listening to people, identifying what they perceive their problems are and then helping them deal with them.

As the story unfolds it tells of the hourly challenges encountered by the parents and wider family of a child who has a learning difficulty. It shows how the interdisciplinary team was, at times, not functional and certainly did not include teachers! As parents Nuala and her husband were not acknowledge as an integral part of the team. Again the professionals knew best. Have things really changed in the current health and social care arena? I would hope so...

So where does Henry come in? The family discovered the benefits of Henry the golden retriever quite by accident. About half way through the book Henry becomes part of the family and what follows shows how communication skills can be modified for an individual. The importance of actually establishing communication overrides the 'how'. Through Henry Dale learns to integrate into mainstream education and to progress into adulthood.

For those who are dog lovers, be prepared for the inevitable ending. Tissues are required! As health and social care students, listen to the story. Many messages are delivered in this interesting and heart-warming book and by listening to them you could become a more empathetic and understanding professional.