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Trevor Clark

Objective: *The aim of this paper is to illustrate through poetry that self-directed recovery from mental illness is possible, and that through vigilance and a supportive network of family and mental health workers, life beyond recovery can be full and rewarding for any consumer.*

Conclusions: *Through positive choice, a consumer can break the cycle of admission and realize self-empowerment, which can lead to a full and complete life.*

Key words: *consumer, mental health, poetry, recovery, schizophrenia.*

One of the most beautiful things about life is when you are free from all of your perceived obstacles – in my case, schizoaffective disorder – anything is possible and the world is indeed your oyster. With the support of mental health professionals to find the right balance of medication and through my own self-directed recovery, I have gained a positive understanding of myself – and a healthy and lasting respect for the power of community, family and mateship.

I will discuss and illustrate with my recent poetry what I believe to be important consumer issues and also some of the methods I have employed on my journey of recovery – the mantras, strategies and methods I draw on every day of my life to keep the negative aspects of my condition at bay. I believe that other consumers who wish to gain not only control over their condition but also of their lives and relationships, could apply these methods. When confronted with a choice to regain understanding and control of my life over a future of walking through the revolving door of admission and regulation, I chose the former.

I believe the pivotal factor in recovery for a consumer is to recognize and own without compunction their individual condition. Without this, I could not have been able to guide myself through my self-directed recovery. By owning my condition, I could begin to recover. On reflection, I realize that this was the turning point for me on the road to becoming well again. In a sense, mental illness has been a blessing, not a curse, and I hope more consumers can embrace this thought wholeheartedly.

By motivating consumers to realize the importance of this positive ownership of their condition, the cornerstone for their recovery can remain firmly grounded. Of course, this foundation in thought may require the services of mental health professionals. The trust a consumer needs in their recovery team is vitally important in the early stages of recovery. Fostering trust between consumers and their mental health team enables reinforcement of the ownership of their condition.

Building trust and accepting ownership of a condition can result in a reliant consumer making the transition to being self-motivated and autonomous – benefiting the consumer and more effectively using resources (on my journey of self-directed recovery I have sought not to burden the health system – I felt that the doctors and staff had already done enough and the rest was up to me). Personally, I have found that by gaining positive ownership of my condition and using strategies such as

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Editor's note: At *Creating Futures 06* Trevor Clark presented his story of "poetry and self recovery", which was the concluding contribution to the publication from that conference. When I met Trevor he was working as a taxi driver in Brisbane and in the half-hour of our drive into the city I became aware of his journey of recovery from mental illness – and the importance to that of family and creativity. We have remained in contact since and his journey has continued. He has worked as a driver around Brisbane and as a haul-out driver for the sugar cane industry in north Queensland. Writing poetry has remained a passion challenged by the demands of earning a living, but he has also begun to collaborate in a venture proofreading scientific and medical materials. In 2008 his father, a central figure in his life and recovery, died. Trevor returned to Cairns under his own steam to attend *Creating Futures 08* in which recovery and creativity were both foregrounded. With evidence accumulating supporting reflective creativity in reclaiming a positive sense of identity¹ we were honoured that he brought both of these streams together in the closing plenary – 'poetry – recovery and beyond'.
Ernest Hunter

self-talk, I have been able to gain a grounded understanding of myself. As a result, my life, socially, emotionally and economically, is in balance.

Poetry has been and continues to be a great outlet for my thoughts and emotions on my journey. It has helped me to keep tabs on my progress when recovering, and more recently to map the progress of my wellness. Recently, I was reflecting on how lucky I was to have a supportive network of mental health professionals to relate to in my darkest hour. I have put pen to paper on this thought and written *Empowering Mind*. The poem aims to describe the essence of what I believe these workers were trying to do for me during this hard time. The poem also illustrates that mental health troubles are best attacked and addressed head on, so that the healing process can begin.

EMPOWERING MIND

Let go of your past,
Your mistakes, your losses.
There are times of sadness,
There are times of laughter.
All emotions make up your character.

Let go of your worries,
Settle down in the chair.
We are all friends here,
We all have notes to compare.

There is no shame, no banter.
We have all had times to encounter.
You will see, you will learn,
However, most of all you can learn to discern.

That the world outside is beautiful, complete.
It is time to face your demons, to never retreat.
This choice is yours from now and you will see,
That we are here to help,
To help make you unique.

In a perfect world, I would be free from auditory and visual hallucinations, but my reality is quite different. Through my own strategies, I manage these aspects of my condition by turning them into humorous ditties. Recently, for example, I thought I saw a gorilla on the side of the highway on my way home from work in North Queensland. I thought it was pretty strange and rechecked and, yes, it was definitely a gorilla. This puzzled me so, the next day, on my way home from work I rechecked and found that the gorilla was in fact a piece of burnt log. I thanked myself for re-examining the gorilla site. The gorilla log could have easily become something mentally challenging if I had not been able to laugh at my thoughts and myself.

Recovery is a reality. I believe that a consumer must want to recover to return to a meaningful life. It is also important that the consumer – or anyone for that

matter – must always look toward their future, remembering that the fundamental aim is to be an active participant in life. All too often people focus on their past failures without recognizing that the future is yet to happen. You can create a future but cannot erase the past. I have found that by instilling these ideals in my own psyche, the dormant inner drive – which I honestly think every consumer and person possesses – gained momentum and from this point on I was motivated to crave recovery.

Sand Banter, a reflective poem written in 2007, alludes to the points I have made above and focuses on the progression from ‘past dwelling on’ to a more positive ‘future thinking pose’ and how nature inspires me on my journey through life.

SAND BANTER

I had been hiding from the sun.
I couldn't walk, I couldn't run.
Could only see my curtains.
Obvious it was – I was uncertain.

I had been sticking out my thumb.
I could walk, I could run.
When I saw the road, I smiled –
For miles and miles and miles.

I sit thinking about the sun,
How it blazes, how it runs.
Over the sky and beyond.
I know it is there – I abscond.

I lay now under the sun.
I walked, I did not run.
Picked its beauty as it travelled.
I am happy. I am mellow.

I had been too long on the run.
From myself, from all the guns.
From the relief of the sky.
I knew then I had to try.

Looking towards the sun, I run.
The soft sand caresses – it is fun.
My eyes are open and look ahead.
I see the ocean, my love, my friend.

Discovering my own limits was also a stepping stone on my path to recovery. By this, I mean that I set achievable goals and as I progressed, I was prepared to test my limits and push myself onwards one step at a time. Consumers need to know what their limits are, especially when it comes to alcohol and drug consumption. Sometimes you have to give something up to gain something better and I know that the minute I decided to curb my excessive drinking and forgo participation in recreational drug use, my mind became

clearer and with time, I wondered why I ever bothered with them in the first place. Reality itself is a natural drug for me; it costs nothing and offers plenty of enjoyment that is incomparable with recreational drugs.

I have realized that I am a part of this world. I am not alone. I had a choice to recover, I set myself the goal, and bit by bit, I made a full recovery. I was and continue to be vigilant with my hallucinations and although they occur infrequently, they remind me of where I have come from. I can laugh them off now – it is my choice – and I recommend more consumers develop their own strategies to work through their mental anguish. After all, each one of us knows what works best for us. I still have my bad days, which is quite normal and consumers also need to realize this.

Medication is a necessary daily part of my life, but only a small part. People take a Panadol for a headache and I take a pill for my sanity. To me this is not a bad trade off at the end of the day. Solely relying on medication though is not an option for me. The medication eases my symptoms, but the daily use of positive self talk, of addressing aberrant thoughts and dealing with them as they occur, coupled with a healthy lifestyle, I believe are more important in staying well. By using poetry, I have found solace and an outlet for the machinations of my mind. Poetry helps me map my progress and is an invaluable reflection tool.

Just before the *Creating Futures* conference I was working in the Burdekin district of north Queensland as a haul-out driver for the sugar cane harvest. The final poem I would like to share with you – *Mush* – describes what I believe we all do. My distant relative, William Roberts, was the chef on the Shackleton Expedition of Antarctica in 1907/08. They used huskies to ferry their goods across the ice and I am sure we are all familiar with the use of the command ‘mush’ in relation to this. When I am up at 4am, pushing sugar carriages along the siding line, this is what I say to myself. Inspired by Mr Roberts’s memory, *Mush* was born.

MUSH

Early, real early brother.
You mush, you mush.
For us it is easy.
Just mush.

The fire is burning still.
Stars are there shining.
For us it is easy.
Mush. Just mush.

Heat on your back.
Push, shove, mush.
Give it your all.
Mush to your hearts content.

Wind pushes against you.
You mush. I mush.
Down the line, we mush.
I hope. We will mush.

It is time.
Hang up that hat.
Have a brew and think.
The mush was not that hard.

Relax, enjoy and thank.
Yourself for your mush.
We will stop now and
Laugh about our mush.

Mush about mush.

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1. Wisdom JP *et al.* ‘Stealing me from myself’: identity and recovery in personal accounts of mental illness. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 2008; **42**: 489–495.