

# Reviewers give their reasons for discontinuing with NCAC

The National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) selects and trains reviewers to conduct the external review integral to the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS). However, the turnover rate of these reviewers is high and this means the NCAC has a pool of relatively inexperienced reviewers at its disposal. Brenda Abbey has produced a research paper on the reasons for this attrition rate and has found that unless changes occur to the QIAS and to the NCAC's selection and management of reviewers, this high turnover rate will continue.

The high attrition rate of QIAS reviewers has been an issue for the children's services sector for some time and has been evident through the frequency of NCAC advertisements for suitably qualified and experienced applicants willing to train as reviewers, discussions with colleagues in the field, and a range of childcare industry forums and publications.

I concluded that knowing the reasons for this high turnover of reviewers is important because:

- the link between the QIAS and Childcare Assistance virtually compelled centres to take part in the QIAS in order to remain economically viable;
- the external review conducted by reviewers is integral to the QIAS;
- the information gathered by reviewers during reviews is the basis of the accreditation decision handed down by the NCAC, and this decision can affect the earning capacity of centres;
- centres have a right to a skilful, knowledgeable reviewer;
- for the most part, experience brings with it further expertise;
- the Federal Government is accountable for taxpayers' money spent in the use and training of reviewers; and
- reviewers are vital to the QIAS goal of quality care for all children in long day care centres.

Through some of the preliminary research, it was discovered that while the NCAC was pleased with its reviewers, many private long day care centre operators were not. Indeed, the latter wrote of reviewers—professionally and personally—in a derogatory manner.

It was also discovered that reviewers' opinions appeared only in NCAC publications and only when those opinions were in praise of their own role, the success of the QIAS and the NCAC.

Accordingly, the purpose of my research was to identify the reasons reviewers ceased working with

the NCAC. I considered this would be best achieved by asking past reviewers to state their motives for applying for the role, their experiences as reviewers, and why they discontinued as reviewers. Of the 77 past reviewers that were interviewed nationally as part of the research:

- 86 per cent were or had been directors, with the remainder being assistant directors and group leaders;
- 78 per cent worked in community-based centres;
- 13 per cent worked in private centres;
- 9 per cent stated they were employed directly by the NCAC either full- or part-time and were not attached to centres;
- 70 per cent were trained in 1994–5, thirteen per cent in 1996, nine per cent in 1997 and eight per cent trained in 1998;
- 56 per cent reviewed for less than two years and 88 per cent for less than three years. Less than 8 per cent reviewed for more than four years with only one stating she reviewed for over five years before resigning; and
- 90 per cent ceased after conducting less than 25 reviews, with as many as 50 per cent ceasing after ten or less.

## Respondents' motives for becoming reviewers

Each respondent gave more than one reason for becoming a reviewer, the main reasons being a commitment to quality care, for professional development and experience, and a commitment to the industry. All respondents included at least one reason directly related to their commitment to quality care and/or professional development and experience, and it was clear they regarded commitment to quality care and commitment to professional development as synonymous.

### ● *Commitment to quality care*

All respondents to this survey strongly endorsed the notion of quality care and believed they could

facilitate this outcome in centres by becoming reviewers. It is noteworthy that 48 per cent of the respondents also specifically stated they wanted to support the QIAS because of its goal of quality care for all children in long day care centres. Another 9 per cent was forthright that the childcare industry in Australia required an external control mechanism if quality care was to be consistent across centres. Further, they believed standards were measurable. Nineteen per cent presumed their experience in the field would assist the NCAC in securing quality outcomes for children. Finally, 9 per cent of the respondents had been a part of the voluntary accreditation and the pilot schemes for the QIAS or overseas and, for them, reviewing for the NCAC was a logical progression.

#### ● *Professional development and experience*

All respondents were attracted by the prospect of genuine professional development and by the opportunity to gain expertise in accreditation through training and experience as reviewers. Sixty-nine per cent of these respondents specifically mentioned how important this would be for their work in their own centres, and 4 per cent also added it was their employers who recognised the benefits of having staff who had undergone reviewer training. Some 17 per cent also valued the opportunity to gather information about the way other centres were implementing the QIAS.

#### ● *Commitment to the industry*

Some (13 per cent) of respondents hoped that the QIAS would not only bring about some sort of professionalism in the childcare industry but a more acceptable profile in the eyes of both the public and government. Others (8 per cent) wanted to contribute back to the field by supporting their colleagues and influencing working conditions.

### **Respondents' reasons for ceasing as reviewers**

Respondents' reasons for ceasing with the NCAC fell into two main categories. The NCAC discontinued 48 per cent because they no longer met the criteria of being a peer reviewer. The remaining 52 per cent tendered their resignation to the NCAC, and their reasons for doing so directly related to their experiences in the role, including the demands of the role; the behaviour of private centre operators and staff; disillusionment with the QIAS process; the lack of recognition and/or support from the NCAC; stress; and obligations to their own centre.

#### ● *Demands of the role*

Clearly, respondents found reviewing to be more physically and emotionally exhausting and time-consuming than anticipated. They spoke of the preparation prior to the review visit, the travel

involved, long days at the centre during the review visit, the actual hard work of 'observing and recording information skilfully and accurately', the pressure of time constraints and the intensity of the review days, often culminating in an emotional and sometimes confrontational final director's meeting. Some (28 per cent) saw one-day reviews as excessively demanding. These reviews, they said, often took 16 hours when travel was added to a long and intensive day at the centre. In addition, any unexpected time-consuming complication created intense pressure.

#### ● *Behaviour of private centre operators and staff*

Respondents (25 per cent) became disillusioned by what they perceived as a superficial commitment of some private centres, often accompanied by deliberate attempts to 'fool the system' rather than focusing on the process and its outcomes of quality care. Respondents made claims of so-called 'accreditation kits' being passed between centres, consultants being employed in the week prior to the review visit, extra staff and equipment being brought in for the review day, and staff changing their practices for the duration of the review visit. Further, they perceived that the QIAS process has no way of countering this because reviewers could only go through the motions of writing what they saw during the review visit, discounting the 'gut feelings' derived from their experience and knowledge of childcare centres.

The disrespect for the QIAS shown by some private operators was, on occasions, accompanied by a lack of respect for the reviewers themselves. Some respondents (23 per cent) claimed that some private long day care centre directors and/or management exerted inordinate pressure on them during reviews and, even worse, some were rude and aggressive. One commented on 'the hard nose private operators', and another saw them as seeking to 'push the system and the reviewer'.

A number of respondents who had resigned (18 per cent) also felt constrained in their role by fear of personal and professional affronts after the review. A few claimed they suffered long-lasting effects of this nature following unpleasant dealings with operators and staff.

#### ● *Disillusionment with the QIAS process*

A little over half the respondents (53 per cent) were convinced that the external review, as currently performed, was not a reliable or an efficient way of determining the quality of care provided by long day care centres day-to-day, nor could it facilitate outcomes of quality care in centres whose owners and/or staff chose not to cooperate. In addition, the documentation required during the review visit was complicated, detailed and time-

consuming, but still did not result in consistent and fair results for all centres.

● *Lack of recognition and/or support from the NCAC*

Nearly half of the respondents felt that the NCAC staff had failed to support them in their task and/or recognise their commitment. Respondents saw this as inexcusable given the additional demands of reviewing beyond their substantive positions. Some highlighted that both tasks attracted the same remuneration despite a reviewer's day being far longer. For those with part-time positions, the disparity between the hours worked in their own centres and those during a review day—for the same remuneration—was even greater.

● *Stress*

In addition to the rigours of the review visit, there were a number of other issues that created stress for respondents, including:

- concerns about the way other reviewers completed the task added to the stress of some respondents (35 per cent);
- awareness of staff upset during reviews and certainly the emotions (...crying, anger...) of the director at the director's meeting at the end of a long day also distressed some respondents (25 per cent).
- many of them (20 per cent) found it stressful to observe bad practice, and difficult to be unable to offer advice and support when requested by staff. Centres exacerbated this by not understanding the reviewer's role as a validator rather than consultant.
- 10 per cent were dismayed by the lack of confidentiality in all types of centres. Their names were published in centre newsletters and were displayed at entrances. Further, names of reviewers, together with their personal details and their review conduct, were discussed inappropriately.
- While they understood parents' desire to convince them of the quality of the care provided by the centre under review, a few respondents (2 per cent) found it aggravated the time constraints of the review day bringing with it added stress.

● *Obligations to their own centre*

Respondents (17 per cent) cited obligations at their own centres—particularly finding replacement staff when they were in charge of a group—amongst their reasons for resigning.

● *Other reasons*

Respondents (17 per cent) included personal and family responsibilities amongst their reasons

for resigning. For some (20 per cent), the few compensatory factors attached to the role contributed to their decision to resign.

**Respondents discuss the high attrition rate of reviewers and offer solutions**

Respondents who were discontinued saw the apparent failure of the NCAC to retain experienced reviewers as a concern, and a move to a more inclusive definition of the term 'peer' for reviewers such as themselves would substantially address this. Of the 26 who specifically offered solutions, 20 advocated for the NCAC to reconsider the eligibility criteria, three for paid reviewers, and three for the NCAC adjusting its feedback in frequency and content especially for novice reviewers.

The 40 respondents who resigned were, of course, able to identify the factors which led to their own resignations, and 20 suggestions to counter these factors were received. Eleven suggestions related to the NCAC employing its own full-time reviewers and the remaining nine suggestions to restructuring the QIAS principles and the review process itself. The proposed full-time reviewers would possess the specific skills required for the task such as negotiation. Amongst other things, they would be unencumbered by the usual centre demands. A likely advantage of this arrangement would be an evolving formalised pool of experience and knowledge. These reviewers, they believe, would be less prone to recrimination from disgruntled operators and staff of centres they have reviewed because they do not have to return to the field after reviews.

**Findings of the study**

The QIAS was introduced to ensure all children in long day care centres receive quality care, and the importance of reviewers in this system is well documented. Centre staff are primarily motivated to become reviewers because they are committed to quality childcare for children in long day care centres and believe the QIAS can facilitate this. They also saw the reviewer's role as vital to the integrity of the process. Reviewers find the prospect of the professional development which accompanies reviewer training a highly attractive prospect. The knowledge of the QIAS, the NCAC—and, to a lesser extent, the way other centres implement the QIAS—that they will gain as reviewers is seen as useful in the development of outcomes of quality care in their own centres. Subsumed in all aspects of this professional development is an unstated acceptance of the accreditation process and its goal of quality care. I believe that respondents viewed the professional development they anticipated as reviewers as being synonymous with their commitment to quality care.

This emphasis placed on professional development by respondents—especially in relation to gaining knowledge of the QIAS and the NCAC in order to benefit their own centres—could well be anticipated because the NCAC itself uses this issue to entice long day care staff to become reviewers.<sup>1</sup> It may also reflect a deeper need within the field for a system of professional advancement, although this is debatable at this point.

The results of this study have revealed, however, that reviewing is a specialised, demanding, time-consuming, lonely and even stressful task. It is naive to state that the competent reviewer's role is merely to validate Self-study Reports. Indeed, the task can go well beyond this. Setting aside the ratings of centres is integral, and any downward change to a centre's evaluation of its own performance is certain to draw emotion. The reactions of centre operators and staff (in particular, privately owned centres) at these times can fall anywhere on the emotional continuum from disappointment to anger to aggression, especially if they perceive their reputation and income are at stake. It can be stressful to be the recipient of such reactions. A small percentage of respondents experienced professional and personal victimisation from centres staff.

The reported poor attitude of some private operators and staff towards respondents during and after reviews would also be consistent with the derogatory comments which were published in the magazines of the journals from some of the bodies representing owners of private long day care centres. Considering these factors influenced 25 per cent of reviewers in their decision to resign from reviewing, this problem should be considered a critical one, and one that requires new strategies to address.

The study also revealed that reviewers find the detailed and complicated documentation required by the present QIAS process is difficult to complete within the time-frame of the review visit. It also lacks the dimensions to illuminate that many centres operate at one level during the review visit and another for their day-to-day operations.

Reviewers can find their experiences as a reviewer very stressful. Other reviewers contribute to this stress because their varying interpretations of the different levels of quality of the review principles result in unfair results for some centres. Also, staff in centres inadvertently contribute to reviewer's stress because of their own level of stress during the review visit as well as their lack of understanding that the confines of the reviewers' role prevents them offering centre staff the advice they seek.

The research has indicated that, while applicants for reviewer training supposedly possess similar

qualifications and experiences in childcare, some go on—after training—to revel in the task while others fail to come to terms with its demands. The latter group requires far more individually tailored support than the NCAC currently offers. Both groups require clear confirmation that the NCAC is aware that reviewing makes far greater demands of them than working in their own centres, and that it is only their commitment to the QIAS/quality care that continually motivates them in the absence of negligible financial reward and little industry recognition. Overall, these results reveal that, despite a strong initial commitment to the QIAS process by respondents, stresses were involved in undertaking reviews, it was more demanding than they had



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expected, and that they felt they did not obtain sufficient recognition or remuneration by the NCAC for their work.

However, after completing relatively few reviews, many reviewers begin to question the QIAS's ability to do so. The review process is not structured to ascertain the quality of care delivered by centres—other than during the review visit—and the NCAC has no means to compel centres to implement the QIAS other than superficially if centres are averse to the system. Therefore, motivation in reviewers wanes.

Reviewers conclude that the requirement of reviewers being peers is less important than their ability to manage the demands of the role. Reviewers who resign see the solution as the NCAC directly employing reviewers who possess the considerable skills required by the role, while reviewers who are discontinued by the NCAC because they no longer meet the criteria of a peer reviewer are likely to question this criteria in its present form. Despite the latter's acknowledgment of the value of the peer reviewers, they contend that their high standard of performance as reviewers (and empathy for that matter) can be maintained by ongoing contact with their colleagues in the field in any number of capacities, including reviewing.

### Implications for the field

This study shows that the current selection criteria may not eliminate applicants who patently would find reviewing an overwhelming challenge. Similarly, the criteria impedes the retention of proven expert reviewers. Accordingly, the researcher believes that procedures for selecting and retaining reviewers should be re-evaluated.

From this research, several difficulties in the role of reviewer have been highlighted. Some of these relate to the task, and others to the suitability of the reviewer for the task. It is clear that if the current method of recruiting reviewers was amended to incorporate the knowledge gained from this study, fewer reviewers would resign disillusioned or be unwilling or unlikely to play the 'key role in the childcare field's acceptance of the Accreditation process' that the NCAC would hope.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, modifying the definition of peer reviewer would retain services of reviewers who have demonstrated their competency in the role. Undeniably, it would also be consistent with reviewers' acceptance that NCAC staff can train, advise and debrief reviewers without the requirement of returning to the field every twelve months.

The goals of the QIAS are more likely to be achieved if changes are made to the NCAC's recruitment and ongoing management of reviewers. The recommendations from my research are:

- experienced reviewers who remain active in

childcare—although no longer attached to a long day care centre—be deemed peer reviewers for two further years;

- the NCAC contract a specified number of experienced reviewers for up to two years, and these contracts be formally advertised;
- the process of selecting reviewers for training be strengthened by including a formal interview to further determine suitability;
- reviewers to be experienced with two-day reviews before being allocated one-day reviews;
- a calendar of reviewer meetings be distributed to reviewers at the beginning of each year;
- centres be instructed that any adverse comments on reviewer performance to the NCAC must be in writing and supported by explicit examples;
- the present yearly certificates of appreciation sent to reviewers include details of the number of one-day and two-day reviews completed by the reviewer during that time; and
- upon ceasing with the NCAC, each reviewer be given a statement outlining the role of the reviewer and the skills required to perform the task. In addition, the letter should clearly state the length of time served as a reviewer and the number of one-day and two-day reviews conducted by the reviewer during that time.

It is debatable at this point whether changes to the QIAS to be implemented in 2002 will result in the NCAC retaining the services of its validators—as reviewers will then be known—for longer terms. It appears that some of the significant issues that have been raised by respondents in this survey have been addressed, but many others have not. ●

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**Brenda Abbey** recently completed her research paper, *The attrition rate of reviewers is high: Reviewers give their reasons for discontinuing with the National Childcare Accreditation Council*, which was submitted to Charles Sturt University. She has worked in early childhood settings for over 20 years, including six years as Director of a long day care centre and as a QIAS reviewer. Brenda is currently the Childcare Resources Officer with the Queensland Department of Families.

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