

Ruby Red Slippers and the Myth of Patient Power

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In the Wizard of Oz, a tornado sweeps hapless Dorothy to Munchkinland, where she kills an evil witch, is bestowed with magical ruby slippers, and begins a dangerous and difficult quest to find her way back home via the wonderful Wizard of Oz. In the final scenes of this classic film, after a series of near-death experiences, Dorothy is told by the good witch Glinda that she could have gone home at any time, and in fact she “...had the power all along, my dear.”

I thought of Dorothy and her ruby red slippers when reading a recent article on The Conversation on patient safety; [Why you should avoid hospitals in January](#). The article featured a well-meaning rallying call for patients: ‘If you see something that doesn’t look right, speak up, and speak up again.’

While author Stephen Duckett absolutely acknowledges that ‘the burden of fixing health system problems should never rest on the shoulders of those with least power – patients and their families and carers...’, he does suggest that ‘Alert and active patients and their families and carers can help identify and prevent errors.’

This, to put it bluntly, is a very optimistic view. The reality is that even the most activated, empowered patient or carer can face insurmountable odds in speaking up. I’m not talking evil flying monkeys, but close. Apart from the possible physical and emotional exhaustion and vulnerability that comes with being in hospital (have you ever tried negotiating something dressed just in a hospital gown?) there’s a good chance that they’re being supported by a health worker who can’t speak up for themselves, let alone support patient concerns.

Ironically, health services can be some of the unhealthiest places to work. The most recent [Auditor General Office report](#) into bullying and harassment in the health sector highlighted that bullying is experienced by some 25% of all health workers, and some 40% of nursing professionals. While measures have been put in place to act on recommendations made by that 2016 VAGO report, the reality is that organisational culture change around bullying and harassment is a long game – a bucket of water won’t melt that particular wicked witch.

Yes, alert and active patients and carers can help identify and prevent errors, but they need to be in a health service that’s ready for that kind of ruby slipper power. They need to be in a health service with healthy confidence and capacity to accept and respond to non-clinical perspectives. They need to be in a health service that’s transparent about what errors look like, and demonstrates it’s a safe place to share concerns. They need to be in a health service where the staff feel safe and supported, so they can provide safety and support to patients.

Before we get too excited about sharing the responsibility for speaking up about safety, let’s be clear that for patients and the people that care for them, it’s a very long and winding (yellow brick) road. We may have the brains, heart and courage to speak up, but that means nothing if a service is not ready or able to hear us.

Belinda MacLeod-Smith is an active consumer leader, recently joining Health Issues Centre as their consumer liaison officer. As the primary carer for someone living with a chronic illness, she aims to use her experience to support and empower consumer voices for better health outcomes.