

Banks of time

Renowned American writer and academic Edgar Cahn will be giving the keynote address at this year's annual social services conference. Here Martin Simon, a strong admirer, gives us a glimpse of Cahn's work, and how it can be applied in current social care settings.



Martin Simon

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'Doctor Cahn makes a compelling case for a something for something society.'

For over forty years Dr Edgar Cahn has worked tirelessly for social justice. He founded the National Legal Services Programme, (legal aid), in the USA and he campaigned fearlessly for the rights of Native Americans. Later, he opened the Antioch School of Law, the first to provide legal training for people from disadvantaged and black minority ethnic groups.

Once a speech writer for Bobby Kennedy, he is the author of two ground breaking books, *Our Brother's Keeper* and *No More Throw Away People*. He has also invented Time Dollars, a tax-free complementary currency that rewards people for their participation in rebuilding their communities and is redefining volunteering for the twenty first century.

Called 'time banking' in the UK, this new technology is actively involving many thousands of people in reforming the delivery of public services, in revitalising their neighbourhoods and at the same time improving their own health and well being.

Underlying all of Dr Cahn's work is the Co-production Imperative, a timely reminder that social programmes only achieve really positive and sustainable outcomes when they actively involve those they are trying to help as partners, as 'co-producers' of mutually desirable long-term change.

Although social theorists and policy makers would agree that co-production is an imperative, some 'service providers' still treat 'service user' engagement as a luxury add-on, seldom reaching out beyond

uninspiring consultation exercises or participation strategies that attract the same few local activists that have always been around.

In *No More Throw Away People* Dr Cahn sets out his vision for fundamental changes in the delivery of social welfare services. His ideas are built around four core values:

People are Assets

The real wealth of any society is its people. Every individual has something to contribute to the well being of their local community, be it their practical support, their experience, their empathy, their skills or their time.

Redefining Work

Activities such as bringing up children, caring for people who are marginalised, keeping communities safe and making democracy work have to be rewarded and counted as real work.

Reciprocity

The need to give, receive and to reciprocate is deeply rooted in human nature; they are the building blocks of positive social relationships and healthy communities.

Social Capital

Belonging to a mutually supportive and secure social network brings more meaning to our lives and new opportunities to rebuild our trust in one another.

To adopt these core values we need to change our perception of 'service users', to resist viewing them, or the community itself, as the problem, but rather see them as assets, as vital parts of a joint solution.

Dr Cahn makes a compelling case for a 'something for something' culture to be applied across all welfare services. That is to say, wherever services are provided then the recipients should pay back in some way, not to the providers of the service, but to their own community.

They can do this by passing on new learning to their peers or by participating in some form of self help network. In either event their perception of themselves will change from a passive consumer to a crucial and valued asset in a positive cycle of change.

Everyone has something to contribute and can be encouraged to build on the strengths that they do have, as and when they are fit to do so. It is well worth noting that when people do not have a chance to contribute, to feel valued, they do not feel connected at all.

Polly Wiessner, an anthropologist at the University of Utah, has pointed out that charity wounds: "doctors who refuse to accept gifts from patients, even verbal gifts or gifts of knowledge, may fail to establish equality and two-way communication. Programmes to help the poor in our country or foreign aid programmes that do not elicit 'give and take' result in humiliation, resentment, and low levels of co-operation."

In today's social services, staff are often obliged to become gate keepers,