

**We need a radical shift in thinking  
to support the CPA to deliver in  
the way originally intended, says  
Steve Morgan**

# CPA – process or event?

Why is it that something so intrinsically right as the Care Programme Approach (CPA) should stir such conflicting emotions nearly 16 years after its introduction? The CPA is founded on principles that it would be difficult for anyone to disagree with. Assessing needs and reviewing progress in a way that places the individual at the centre of their care is an idea all the stronger for its simplicity. However, for all that it may be articulated simply, many experience the reality as a complex, time-consuming and frequently frustrating endeavour.

As an acronym CPA is unlikely to be considered in mental health services as standing for 'Creative, Passionate and Artful'. It is much more likely to be seen as 'Changing Practitioners into Administrators'. How it is viewed may depend on your role in the mental health system. Service managers may see it as 'Continuing Professional Assessment' or 'Constant Practice Audit', whereas practitioners may view it as 'Continuous Paper Accumulation' or 'Constant Pressures Applied'. Service users and carers may have a very different perspective, experiencing it as 'Continuous Personal Assault' or 'Constant Promises Avoided'.

Sharpe<sup>1</sup> raises the analogy that at 16 years of age the CPA has reached adolescence, developmentally fraught with conflicts and potentials as the struggle for identity plays itself out within a tension between different agendas, pressures and ideas of what the adolescent could become. On reflection, the CPA hardly experienced

an auspicious childhood, seen by many as an unwanted child. Staff who were doing good practice saw it as an unnecessary addition to what they were doing anyway, and staff not necessarily doing good practice saw it as ... well, an unnecessary addition. It is no wonder in this scenario that it has grown into an adolescent full of promise and potential but still conflicted as to what it is meant to do, and how.

All of this confusion has become further compounded by misinterpretation of what its intentions are. It should be a process for delivering and reviewing 'good practice', but by design it has become too frequently interpreted as an event through the medium of the CPA meeting, with a specific bureaucratic outcome of completing and signing off the CPA form. The event is born out of regulation, administration and caution. In turn, caution is born out of the fears associated with risk – so much so that the fear of something going wrong prevails over the urge to do something right.

A lack of clarity of definition may also be due to losing our focus on the true values and underlying principles. Do we ever have time in our pressurised practice to reflect on our value-base and how it translates through the CPA? The real challenge lies in shifting attitudes in order to recapture the CPA's original good intentions. This requires tackling the established mindsets of both practitioners and service managers, whose values and principles have become submerged by the risk agenda.



### An administrative approach

An administrative approach is the principal driver of the CPA as an event; that is, the one-off happening in the form of a meeting. The purpose of reviewing progress is only considered efficient if we are able to get protagonists in the same room at the same time and somehow agree the often disparate range of decisions required to be made. Then we are tasked to repeat the trick over and over again every six months. This set of circumstances has been described as an 'uncaring approach',<sup>2</sup> whereby the service-centred needs win through, with unfortunate consequences. Most notably, the tension between bureaucracy and practitioner judgement results in greater volumes of paperwork, often repeating what already exists.

Practitioners comments from my interviews about the CPA shed a sad light: 'a paper exercise', 'a burden', 'stifling', 'mechanical and uncreative', 'no time for proper dialogue'. Over-regulation, driven by the need to audit targets that produce no relevant returns to staff, makes administrators out of practitioners. Nothing 'artful' is likely to emerge from this bureaucratic approach to service design unless by accident. Service users deserve something better than occasional good practice by accident.

### A cautionary approach

Strongly aligned to the administrative approach, a cautionary approach provides the more usual additional ingredient of fear – specifically, the fear of things going wrong. The CPA becomes seen as a primary mechanism for identifying and managing risk. Theoretically at least, these anxieties are managed through the collective experience of the event. If communication is a frequent factor in service failures, then getting people in the same room surely will enable the communication factor to be better managed? However, this assumes sufficient time, respect for dissonant views, equality rather than hierarchy, resolution of the confidentiality factor and numerous other influences. Even if all these hurdles are cleared, risks still happen.

The needs of the service are usually paramount in event-driven structures. They need to ensure that quantitative targets are met and administrative requirements fulfilled. It is falsely assumed that the service user has been, and wants to be, placed at the centre of this type of review. In this way, the CPA is misappropriated for paranoid, knee-jerk reactions to rare events.

### A visionary approach

The CPA should be a framework for good practice, encompassing all that we are doing and reviewing what we do as an integral and ongoing process. It should be values driven, connecting underlying principles with the ongoing intentions and priorities expressed by the service user – with a balance of providing as safe a service as is reasonable. Achieving underlying principles in practice should be a creative process.

As an evolving guide to good practice, the CPA should be able to inform service users and practitioners of what to expect within services on a regular basis. It should be a mechanism for capturing what the best people do and framing it in a way that everyone can reference. The CPA should focus attention on the 'individualised' process, with a passion for detail.

### A strengths approach

Ultimately, the CPA process should not be driven solely by risks and problems. People require services because of the difficulties and crises they experience. But genuine service user involvement through collaboration requires an equal focus on the individual's abilities, personal qualities, potentials and dreams. These are significant resources that can be used to resolve their problems. However, this requires a paradigm shift in thinking

across practice and policy. We need to go beyond the current level of lip-service paid by services to people's strengths and think about what real strengths-working means if we genuinely wish to support people to undertake their own recovery journeys.<sup>3</sup>

Would this approach conflict with service needs? Real examples of connecting and responding to people's abilities and priorities should be celebrated as a process that genuinely aims to achieve the important values and principles we claim services and the CPA should be built upon. We should be encouraged to express a passion for good work and celebrate the achievements that are facilitated by the wider vision of the CPA as a framework for good practice. The review will then be a realistic and manageable check that we are delivering good practice rather than an administrative repetition of what has been already documented in other ways.

### A creative approach

This process involves the practicalities of getting away from the administrative approach: being permissive not prescriptive; challenging the need for a meeting unless there is a very good reason for it to take place; and developing the concept of review as a genuine process, CPA documentation becoming a record and an accurate reference to where relevant information on good practice can be found.

Creativity doesn't emerge easily from standardised approaches under pressured time, and it requires more of a practice development approach than a simple training need.<sup>3</sup> When things are ambiguous, the usual systems approach is that of 'tinkering', which leaves fundamental feelings and emotions about the systems unchanged. We need to focus on values, principles and meanings in order to achieve the radical shift in thinking required to support the CPA to deliver in the way originally intended. Many people suggest that there is nothing here that good practitioners are not already doing. In that case, the simple challenge is to 'do what we say we do'!

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Cartoon by Fran Orford

1. Sharpe, L. (2005) Editorials in the spring, summer and autumn issues of *The Approach: The Journal of the CPA Association*, Volume 2.
2. Stickley, T. and Masterson, S. (2003) 'An uncaring approach', *Mental Health Today*, March.
3. Morgan, S. (2004) [www.practicebasedevidence.com](http://www.practicebasedevidence.com)