

The case of Sarah Watson

Background

Sarah Watson is 68 years old, and has major physical health problems and some cognitive impairment as the result of a brain tumour, which has been successfully removed. She currently requires 24-hour care and this is likely to be the case in the future. She currently lives in her own home with her husband who provides her care needs. Sarah is a recipient of direct payments, and so receives regular reviews of her care package to ensure her needs are being met. When carrying out a visit to Sarah's home with the direct payments officer you notice that she looks very unkempt and appears nervous and submissive around her husband. The house is also dirty, and when you help to make a cup of tea for everyone you notice that there is very little food in the cupboards.

You are very concerned that there seems to be a mismatch between the amount of money Sarah should be receiving via her direct payments, and both her living situations and the level of care being provided. Sarah's husband dominates the conversation during your visit, and is unwilling to leave her on her own even for a few minutes. You ask Sarah if she would like to talk to you on her own, but she says she doesn't need to.

Questions

From the information given, what are the key concerns you have about this situation?

Do you think that Sarah's husband is financially abusing her? Could there be any other explanations?

What would you do next?

In this instance, social services began by gathering further information

After further investigations you find out that as well as providing her with care, Sarah's husband also holds lasting power of attorney to deal with her financial affairs, such as her direct payments. You know from Sarah's past history that she was planning to appoint an attorney because the brain tumour had caused memory problems and information processing difficulties. Initially it had been planned that Sarah's brother would hold lasting power of attorney, but for some reason this had not happened.

After looking at the direct payments information in more detail, you also notice that Sarah's husband is claiming to provide 24-hour care, with no breaks. This raises concerns, as scheduled breaks should be taken during the day, meaning that a good care plan for Sarah should involve at least two people. You also have some worries about Sarah's safety, as she requires oxygen intermittently, and the cylinders are not stored securely as they are next to the living room couch where she sits and smokes during the day.

You ask some questions about Sarah's care, and the husband is very uneasy, giving conflicting answers about how money is spent. He says that a lot of money is spent on taxi fares to go to the supermarket, but on the other hand he says that they have to rely on takeaways for food. This makes it clear that both you and the Council are interfering in the situation

Questions

Do you think Sarah's husband is justified in resenting people telling him how to care for Sarah?

What would you do next?

A strategy meeting was called

You contact the adult protection team, who hold a strategy meeting to discuss the case in more detail. After looking through past bank account statements, the direct payments officer reports additional concerns that Sarah's money is being badly managed. For instance, an initial start-up fund had been provided by social care to set up things like carer's insurance and an advertisement for a care worker but these had not been put in place. This was presumably because Sarah's husband had taken on all the caring responsibilities himself, but there was no evidence of how the money had been spent instead.

Because Sarah's husband was both managing the money and paying himself, the adult protection team was concerned that this was a conflict of interest, in particular given that Sarah did not seem to be being provided with adequate care. When asked about why he was fulfilling both roles, he seemed to think he wasn't doing anything wrong, and did not see that there was a problem with the situation. He was also confused about how he should document his time and was not clear about what he was and was not allowed to claim.

Questions

What potential issues have arisen in this case surrounding direct payments?

What recommendations do you feel would be needed in this case to safeguard Sarah's finances?

Recommendations

The recommendation was made that at least two people should be involved with Sarah's care; both to ensure her safety and to make sure Sarah's husband receives adequate breaks. This would also mean that someone else was actively involved in Sarah's care. The second carer was appointed who now visits Sarah at home for four hours each day.

To address the issue of Sarah's husband being both her carer and holding the lasting power of attorney to manage her financial affairs, Sarah's husband was told that unless someone else could be appointed as attorney, that Sarah would have to go back to receiving a traditional service provision where the council provides and pays for carers for her directly. Sarah's husband agreed to return to the initial plan that her brother should hold the lasting power of attorney, and this was organised successfully.

At the next case review Sarah's general living conditions had significantly improved, and her brother was effectively managing her direct payments. The case remains under regular review.