Who audits the tele-technology industry?

The absence of regulation of the Internet has been heralded as an explicit display of freedom of speech. Like many utopian dreams this has worked well until a minority started using it for nefarious purposes. When things do go wrong the response is invariably "why did THEY let this happen?" These outcries are akin to a wave hitting the shore – an initial impact is made and then dissipates until the next time. Arguably one of the waves that is starting to form is the way that the tele-technology industry is monitored and audited.

Arguably the tele-industry has been 'all at sea' for some time. The lack of consensus over tele-terminology doesn't help, nor does an irrefutable answer as to the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of tele-technologies. These, along with the wide range of caveats that litter many tele-technology reviews and assessments, do little to give confidence to health and social care service commissioners or service users.

Over-arching all of this is the way in which the tele-industries represent themselves. In the UK the Telecare Services Association (TSA) is one of the more visible, though 'other alternatives are available'.

With over 370 organisations subscribing to this self-acclaimed industry body, TSA sets "*user-centred quality standards for telecare and telehealth"* which are "*developed in partnership with Government and industry experts*". Collectively, TSA claims its members look after the interests of 1.7 million users. Yet TSA, a not-for-profit organisation, is comparatively small with an annual turnover of around £1m. Until next month (Nov. 14) its governance has been through a Board comprised of rotating representatives elected

from its membership. This has included the role of Chair but not the CEO or MD who are ex-offico members.

In response to a growth in membership and a recognition that Chairs who have day-to-day jobs are invariably juggling competing and sometimes conflicting demands, the TSA's decided to change its approach to the appointment of its Chair.

An article, in July this year in the industry publication, "Telehealth and Telecare Aware", sought interests for a voluntary and unpaid "*Independent Chair who has the vision and commitment to drive the organisation to achieve the exciting, challenging and crucial goals set out in its Business Plan*".

This month, (October 2014), TSA reported that their quest had been successful and new Chair had been found. Surprisingly it is a fully employed Group MD, responsible for a number of companies, one of which, coincidentally, is a main sponsor of the 2014 TSA AGM and annual conference.

So, despite the public announcement of seeking someone independent, the only suitable candidate that the TSA could find was

from within the tele-industry and the TSA's membership.

To some this might seem of little or no concern. However, if TSA was a UK public organisation there would be cries of conflicts of interests, calls for resignations and probably more. But the Nolan Principles of Public Life appear unnecessary in the private sector, even if services are ultimately provided to the public, though some claim they should be[1].

So why should we be concerned? TSA has, along with others, signed a Concordat in relation to 3 Million Lives (3ML) a UK Government initiative to get 3 million people using tele-technologies over a five-year period. 3ML has floundered somewhat and is now rebranded as Technology Enabled Care Services (TECS).

TSA claims to be at the forefront of working with Government on this initiative yet, as demonstrated by the appointment process of their Independent Chair, appears to have

questionable internal governance or ethics. This should set alarm bells ringing as the difficult financial position that commissioners of health and social care services are faced with will increase the pressure to use tele-technologies. Realistically, only private sector tele-organisations can deliver these services at scale, which consolidates the vanguard position of tele-industry organisations such as TSA.

But if organisations that represent the tele-industry, such as TSA, do not meet the expectations of the Nolan Principles, and are not externally scrutinised and audited, what confidence can there be in the downstream supplier/ service provider end of the business?

Like dealing with abuse of the Internet, if self-regulation cannot be trusted, perhaps legislation and an independent regulator is now needed. Otherwise vulnerable service users may have little comfort other than private sector profit-based corporate promises.

1. Brew, P. (2014, June, 25). Ethical Concerns must be built into public service commissioning *The Guardian.* Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jun/25/ethical-concerns-public-service-commissioning

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