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Media Bites: Perspectives

The first time I saw the planes fly into the World Trade Centre buildings, I just didn't get it. It didn't seem real. For days afterwards, I felt quite numb to the horror. Maybe it was shock. I had to force myself to try to imagine what it must have been like for those involved to make it real.

To imagine what it must feel like to have your partner or child go to work on a day just like any other, not knowing that it will be a day like no other. What must it be like, days after the unimaginable has occurred, to be stuck in a place somewhere between hope, that they are still alive, and the reality that it would take a miracle for this to be so?

It is even harder to try to get inside the heads of those who planned or celebrated such acts of destruction. But if we don't at least try, how will we ever understand?

It is difficult enough to try to see the world from another's perspective in the easiest of circumstances. Human nature being what it is, we all tend to think our view is the right one. Far harder to understand the perspective of someone who is attacking us or has a completely different understanding of the world.

Perhaps it is not surprising that one of *the* trendiest topics in health policy making raises the hackles of many medical practitioners. The push to increase consumer participation in health services is emphasised by the quality/safety and evidence-based movements and highlighted in countless reports.

Many health professionals and services find the process of engaging with consumer representatives difficult. If you are trying to do a good job under difficult circumstances, it can be confronting to face negative feedback from those you are trying to help.

But you can look at it another way. "When consumers put up ideas you don't agree with, be pleased. It probably means you are getting input you could not have got without consumer involvement," notes a report by the Consumer Focus Collaboration, which was put together by the

Flinders University Department of Public Health and the South Australian Community Health Research Unit.

Sydney surgeon Brian McCaughan works closely with lay representatives on the NSW Medical Board, which he chairs. He finds their contributions very instructive, particularly as many of the cases before the Board relate to communication issues. "They bring a different perspective," he says. "It's a perspective that you may not see, being part of health."

"I have to deal with difficult, stropky consumer advocates so I know how challenging our behaviour can be," says Hilda Bastian, a longstanding consumer activist. "But even if you don't like the messenger and even if it really hurts you, you still have to listen because you can learn so much."

The Consumer Focus Collaboration's report, "Improving Health Services Through Consumer Participation, a resource guide for organisations", has many examples of why it can pay to engage consumers in planning and feedback. But it also acknowledges the difficulties that are involved, for all parties.

Julie McCrossin is probably best known to many readers from the telly's Good News Week, but has many other strings to her bow - as a lawyer, professional facilitator and carer. She is also a member of the NSW Medical Board, a regular speaker at health forums, and co-chair of a forthcoming report by the NSW Government's Consumer and Community Participation Implementation Group.

McCrossin argues that busy clinicians need support so they can give better information to consumers and engage them in providing feedback. "If I had to sum it up," she says, "there is a huge interest (in consumer participation), but most people don't know how to do it."

That's why the Consumer Focus Collaboration's report is well worth a read. It provides a thoughtful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to consumer participation. And it also makes the important point: that the process is not just about listening and trying to understand another's viewpoint - it is also about being willing and able to make change as a result.

