The Case of Timmy

SCENARIO: Proposed here is an example of a treatment conference in a diagnostic and treatment center for children with multiple physical and psychological disabilities. The client Timmy, 3, has severe cerebral palsy, a disability resulting from damage to the brain before, during, or shortly after birth that results in problems with muscular coordination and speech (Mish, 2008). Timmy has very little control of his extremities, torso, face, and mouth. He has some limited control of his eyes.

After Timmy is referred for assessment, extensive testing is performed by speech, occupational, and physical therapists. A physician conducts a thorough physical examination and orders relevant tests. Sometimes, a geneticist is involved to establish the etiology of the disorder. However, Timmy experienced oxygen deprivation at birth due to the umbilical cord being wrapped around his neck. Since the etiology of the disability has been established, the program director, a physician, determines that a genetic assessment is unnecessary. A psychologist conducts perceptual and ability testing. Finally, a social worker carries out a family assessment.

All evaluators subsequently attend the treatment conference. This particular group cannot be considered a team because it does not work together on a regular basis. For example, there are five occupational therapists and three social workers. The configuration of participants for any particular client varies dramatically as only one professional per discipline is involved with each case. During the treatment conference, participants share their findings and prepare a treatment plan. For children like Timmy, who require ongoing treatment and therapy, an annual treatment conference is automatically scheduled. Only those professionals involved in ongoing treatment attend later treatment conferences. For instance, a speech therapist would no longer be involved with the case if the child did not require speech therapy. Since Timmy has such extensive treatment needs, professionals from all disciplines will be involved in future conferences.

This agency’s policy is to exclude parents and clients from treatment conferences. Some agencies invite clients and/or their families to attend such conferences. Other agencies invite clients and/or families to attend only a designated portion of the conference. Some agencies such as the one providing services to Timmy indicate that having clients and other outsiders present interferes with the frank presentation of information about clients and their families. This agency’s staff also feel that conference content may be too emotionally stressful for clients and their families to hear.