

Katrina's life

A Case Manager in the federal government's Personal Support Programme doesn't know what will happen to his client but believes she has almost certainly been affected prenatally by alcohol. This will probably mean that her future will be just as ravaged with complications as her past has been.

I case-manage an attractive young girl who first came to me around 18 months ago. It took me a long time before I could make any connection with Katrina because she rarely turned up for appointments. However, if she was wandering around the town and happened to be in the vicinity of the office she would visit me. She didn't miss her appointments because she had an aversion to me or because we hadn't bonded, she just didn't seem to remember even though I would text her before her appointment to remind her.

We actually had quite a good relationship. We seemed to bond quite quickly when we did eventually meet because I think she knew I wouldn't make any judgements about how she lived her life. She knew I was there just to help her with her life, so she had no practical reason not to attend appointments.

I found it difficult to help her because we would plan something together, something that would help her in whatever current crisis she was in, and we would agree that each of us would take responsibility for tasks that would tie together to help her, but there was never a time when she completed her task. Her enthusiasm and ability to carry out these out seemed to disappear once she left the office. I later found out it wasn't because her enthusiasm and ability waned, it was because the relevance to her situation diminished. She was unable to work independently and did not seem to have any sense of responsibility. I became more and more frustrated, and less and less able to think of solutions to this problem which held back progress on the issues that were major barriers in her life.

There was one particular thing amongst many which I just couldn't understand – she had laser surgery on her cervix in 2003 and was told she needed to attend regular appointments to monitor this. Her boyfriend used to take her to these appointments but it wasn't long before she simply refused to attend them. She knew what was likely to happen and that by missing her appointments she could be compromising her health but it didn't seem to matter to her. She said she wanted to live and that she knew how important these checkups were but it wasn't enough for her to attend these appointments. Now two years later she has just received a call from the doctor to say that she needs further surgery and I know she is worried that she may have cancer.

Eighteen months ago when I first interviewed her she agreed that she was keen to improve her life, stop taking drugs and drinking alcohol and find stable and safe accommodation. When we first met she was living on the river bank with a group of very ruthless people and although I discussed with her the problems she might encounter living this way she said the people she lived with were all right and she felt safe with them. When she wasn't living on the riverbank, she moved from house to house staying with friends or relatives but she never found stable accommodation where she could get into a routine and find some permanence.

Katrina told me she had quite an aggressive nature even when she was sober if she were pushed too hard. She could quite easily become wound up and angry and told me she was often in trouble for being a public nuisance having been charged on a number of occasions for this behaviour. She had also been in trouble with the police for

stealing and breach of probation.

Her background is very sad. She is the daughter of an alcoholic mother (this didn't ring any bells for me until Elizabeth told me about FAS), lived in a violent household, was diagnosed with schizophrenia at 13 and has attempted suicide several times.

She also has a little girl of her own who is in the legal custody of her father because of Katrina's periods of drug-taking and drinking. I knew that Katrina and her mother had used alcohol during their pregnancies and when she told me I did note that she may be affected but obviously I was unable to do anything about that until she was able to regain custody of her daughter.

It looks like there are potentially four generations who have been exposed to alcohol prenatally in this family. I say four because Katrina's grandmother was also an alcoholic which means that Katrina's mother is possibly affected. That means that Katrina's grandmother, mother, herself and her daughter are all likely to have been affected prenatally by exposure to alcohol.

Katrina's main incentive to clean up her life was a desire to regain custody of her child and although she was able to abstain from alcohol and drugs for short periods she has never been able to sustain her recovery for the length of time required by Family Services. Because of the difficulty in maintaining contact and attending appointments it was impossible for me to motivate and monitor her progress.

Last year she was involved in an attempted armed robbery. I don't believe this was something she planned but because she is impulsive and unpredictable, she probably just went along for the ride and became involved in the attempt without really knowing what she was getting herself into. She was also intoxicated at the time.

This is Katrina's history as I know it, and sad as it is to date, I don't doubt the struggles she has endured will be nothing to the struggles she will endure in the future. Although she has a sweet nature when she is not drinking and we get along well together when she does visit, there was really very little I could do to help because as soon as she was away from the good influences in her life she reverted again to anti-social behaviours.

Even though she is currently in a stable relationship in medium to long-term accommodation, I know from experience that her situation can change in a heartbeat. I feel caught between a rock and a hard place really. I have seen her struggles to regain custody of her daughter and yet I have grave doubts about her ability to parent her. If her daughter has been exposed to alcohol prenatally then she is unlikely to be an easy child to manage but by the same token, I know how desperately Katrina wants to be with her. I wouldn't be surprised if she got pregnant so she could have a child to look after. I have already discussed with her the dangers of alcohol and pregnancy, but I also know that her resolve about doing the right thing only lasts until something more appealing comes along.

Epilogue from her Case Manager

I have just heard from Katrina after a long break and she told me that she has been trying to fall pregnant. This is amazing as she and her partner are always estranged and having big break-ups. Her most recent boyfriend has gone back to his 'ex-missus and kids' who are 'out the bush'. Katrina's comment – 'Oh well there's plenty more fish in the sea.' The eternal optimist! She is also off to court tomorrow for breach of probation. Apparently she is eligible for a suspended sentence but if she breaks this it's off to jail no questions. The problem is, with her history of not attending appointments she is likely to unwittingly break her probation by forgetting to show up.

How can we help these people? They seem to need the 24/7 support of someone good in their lives to make it and how can that possibly happen for people like Katrina?