

Getting involved: information for consumers working on health service committees

All around Australia consumers are getting involved in health organisations and services. They are sharing their experience as users of health services, commenting on consumer and carers' issues and becoming active partners in the design, planning and evaluation of health services.

Why do health and community organisations involve consumers?

- to meet accreditation requirements
- to enhance the quality, safety and effectiveness of organisations
- to understand the community's diverse cultures and particular needs
- to provide appropriate and responsive healthcare

Consumers bring a unique perspective to organisations by representing the views of a particular organisation or of a particular population. Consumers can draw upon their own experience of many things:

- a health condition they are affected by
- their experience of using a health service
- their experience as a carer, family member or friend of a health service consumer
- their participation within their local community

Consumers working on health service committees contribute to improving health outcomes for their entire community. Their work and leadership is all about bringing positive change to a health service.

The role of consumers on committees is to:

- present the consumer perspective (how consumers think and feel)
- contribute consumer experiences
- ensure consumer concerns are recognised and addressed
- provide feedback the committee on issues affecting consumers
- ensure accountability to consumers
- report committee activities to consumers (if appropriate)

A consumer who is asked to join a committee should be provided with clear information about the role and purpose of the committee. They should be given a position statement which clearly describes their personal role and responsibilities.

Although each organisation will have slightly different policies and practices on consumer involvement, there are some basic practical provisions that consumers can expect when they choose to become involved. They include:

- contact details of a support person within the health service
- the offer of hard copies of long documents posted to you, to avoid printing costs at home
- orientation and information about the health service or organisation
- information (including member list) about group or committee you will be attending
- preparation and any background information you may need to understand the context of issues to be discussed
- introduction to all members at first meeting
- clear support from the group Chair for the presence of consumer members
- explanation of unclear terms and health-related jargon
- the right to add items to the meeting agenda and ask questions during meetings
- advance arrival of pre-meeting reading and agenda and sufficient notification of any changes
- preparation or debriefing before and after meetings with a support person, if necessary

An orientation process should be in place for all consumers joining a health service committee. A consumer orientation checklist is available from Health Issues Centre which covers all of this.

Ask about processes for reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses. Some health services also provide a sitting fee for meetings. Be sure to find out how to claim this if it is applicable.

Travel and accommodation costs should be covered by the health service if you are asked to attend a conference or meeting at another location.

Consumers who are involved on committees should expect to be:

- treated with respect
- listened to
- able to ask for clarification
- supported to consult other consumers where necessary
- entitled to disagree
- able to talk to others about their involvement in order to get support and information (they should be informed if any information being considered is confidential)
- given sufficient information in a timely manner
- able to give feedback to the health service about their experience on the committee

If you feel that you are not being treated properly speak up as soon as possible to have the issue addressed.

Don't expect to know everything straight away. Take your time to learn more over time and take the opportunity to attend additional training or participate in other health service activities if you can.

Some questions that consumers should ask on committees:

- Is a new proposal safe and fair?
- Are the choices for consumers quite clear and well-defined?
- What (or whose evidence) is this based on?
- Does it meet all relevant consumers' stated needs?
- Do we know the needs of all affected consumers (including marginalised groups)?
- What are implications of the new initiative/program/service?
- How will we measure that a change has been effective?

Things to remember when you are on a committee as a consumer representative:

- the consumer perspective is not always as a representative; be clear about who you represent
- ask the person who invited you onto the committee if you are able to receive support to attend the meetings (e.g., reimbursement for out-of pocket expenses or a sitting fee for meeting and preparation time)
- make sure you are treated as an active member of the committee and are valued for your participation
- consumers on committees benefit from opportunities for briefing and de-briefing before and after meetings – if appropriate, ask for a briefing and/or debriefing
- being an effective member of a committee may require more time than you think— a meeting of two hours may require up to four hours of preparation, meeting people between meetings, canvassing opinions of other consumers, etc.
- be punctual and come prepared to be an active participant on the committee

Do your homework so you are prepared:

- write things down
- read the paperwork, documents and minutes of meetings
- make an effort to meet the Chair and secretary of the committee
- make sure you know who are the other members of the committee

... And remember:

- you don't have to know all the answers
- don't think you have to represent the whole community
- give yourself time
- look after yourself!