

Getting involved: a dozen tips for telling your story for quality improvement

The use of consumer stories is becoming increasingly popular across the health sector. Stories can be used to improve the safety and quality of healthcare by providing “real life” examples to health service staff, board members and more broadly policy makers and regulators.

It is important that if you are asked to tell your story, you feel confident and prepared to do so. Here are some tips:

1. You have been asked to tell a ‘snapshot’ of your story with a health organisation or service because they value your experience, wisdom and knowledge. They believe their staff can learn from you and will be grateful to hear what you have to say. Don’t doubt yourself.
2. Before you pick which piece of your story you want to tell, decide your main point. Communication? Participation? Respect? Pick one—or two at the most—and stay focused on that.
3. Once you have chosen your main point, think back through your health story (or your family member’s) for brief stories or experiences which help to highlight that point. It can be very hard to do this, but keep asking yourself: ‘Is this detail important for my main point?’ If not, leave it out.
4. Begin with a positive story. Most people have a mixture of good and bad experiences, but if you want to keep your audience listening, think of some things that have worked well. You can come to those that haven’t gone well later.
5. Just as you or your family member is more than an illness, make your talk about more than a medical history. Your medical details can be summarised in just 1-2 sentences—leaving the rest of the talk for your main point. A health professional may not remember that you had breast cancer or your child had a heart condition, but they will remember your story about the nurse who sat with you and made you a cup of tea when you heard some difficult results. Include story details that bring your points to life, but try not to focus on medical history details.

6. Include stories of experiences that could have gone better. Consider pairing these with an example of an experience that did go well. What made the difference? This is a learning opportunity for your audience so don't shy away from making criticisms in a constructive way. But don't mention any health professional or staff member by name, especially when discussing a negative experience.
7. Pick the right stories for the right audience. It's no use telling a group of nurses how the doctors can improve! Focus on relevant stories.
8. Don't stress if you shed a tear or two, but steer clear of stories you can't finish because they're too difficult to tell.
9. Stories are much better told rather than read. It's hard to do, but worth the effort. Practice, practice, practice!
10. Stick to time. If you write out your story, practise it, and then stick to it, you won't run over on time.
11. State your main point again and again and again—and hopefully they will get it!
12. Give yourself a hand. Sharing a personal health story can be very challenging and scary. But also very rewarding. You are part of the improvement team, helping to make health care safer and better for everyone. Well done.

**In preparing, make sure you are clear about who is in the audience, why they have asked you to present your story, whether there are specific areas they would like your thoughts on, and how long you have to present. This will help you in choosing which parts of your story you want to highlight.*

We provide *Telling you story for quality improvement* workshops as part of our Consumers Step Up program. For further information, please call Mary Macheras-Magias at (03) 9664 9343 or email m.macherasmagias@healthissuescentre.org.au.