



Managing a health service complaint

It's important if you're approached by a consumer with a complaint, that you take the time to listen to their concerns and consider how you might be able to address them.

Often people just want a clear explanation of what happened. Some complainants want an acknowledgement that something went wrong, even if the incident was unavoidable or unforeseeable. They may seek an apology, or to see a service improved to prevent the situation occurring again. Sometimes, complainants may want to see someone held accountable or be seeking compensation.

Here are some steps health service providers can take to manage complaints quickly and prevent them escalating.

Have a complaints process

- You, or the organisation you work for, should have a process to receive, investigate and attempt to resolve complaints.
- Explain to the consumer how you will manage their complaint. Responding appropriately can restore trust and prevent a minor grievance from escalating.
- If you feel you can't—or it's not suitable to—manage the complaint, supply the contact details of a person who can (for example, a more senior or experienced staff member or a patient liaison officer).
- Outline the complaint management process and how the complaint will be actioned.
- Give a clear timeframe in which the complaint will be addressed.
- Remember, everyone has the right to make a complaint free from harassment or intimidation.

Why consumers may complain

Experience suggests that people make a complaint because they genuinely feel that something was unsatisfactory with the health service provided to them.

As a result, complaints provide an opportunity for you to view your service from the consumer's perspective and to look for opportunities to improve.

Listen

- Invite the person to talk face-to-face—encourage them to bring along a support person or advocate if they wish.
- Listen carefully and respond sensitively.
- Most consumers greatly value the opportunity to talk about what happened and present their view.

Clarify

- Clarify with the consumer the issues they are concerned about.
- Find out what could resolve their concerns.
- Consider the use of an interpreter.

Understand

- Acknowledge the consumer's feelings, concerns and experience, even though you might disagree. Acknowledge any distress the consumer may be feeling.
- Many complaints arise from miscommunication or misunderstood communication. Acknowledge this without dismissing the consumer's point of view.
- Try to understand the situation from the consumer's perspective.



Explain

- An open discussion and an explanation of what happened will often resolve concerns.
- Avoid technical language, jargon and clichés, and explain medical terms.
- Try not to be defensive.

Reassure

- Consumers are often worried that if they complain, there will be a negative impact on their future care.
- Reassure them that this won't be the case.
- Offer reassurance the complaint will be kept confidential.

Timeliness

- Respond to the complaint as soon as possible, even if it is just to explain the process and timeframe.
- Stick to the timeframe given.
- Keep the complainant informed.
- Give the reasons for any delay.

Finalise

- Provide a full response so the consumer can see their complaint has been taken seriously.
- Explain the steps you took.
- Acknowledge areas of disagreement, or varying accounts without dismissing the consumer's view.
- Outline what happened, any error that occurred, how it happened and any policy or procedure changes you are making to prevent it happening again.
- Be sympathetic. Apologise if appropriate.
- If you and the complainant are unable to resolve the concerns, we are here to help. Contact the Office of the Health Ombudsman for assistance.

Further information

Visit: www.oho.qld.gov.au

Email: info@oho.qld.gov.au

Call: 133 OHO (133 646)

Write: PO Box 13281 George Street
Brisbane Qld 4003

How can the Office of the Health Ombudsman help?

If you are unable to resolve a complaint directly with a consumer, contact the Office of the Health Ombudsman, or refer the complainant to us.

When the Office of the Health Ombudsman receives a complaint, we will decide whether to accept the complaint, generally within 7 days.

If we need more information in order to make a decision, we can seek independent expert advice. We may ask you and/or the complainant for further information or a formal submission.

We will keep you and the complainant updated throughout this process. All information is reviewed thoroughly, impartially and fairly—we don't take sides.