

HEALTH CONSUMERS' COUNCIL (WA) INC

ADVICE TO CHAIRS OF COMMITTEES WITH CONSUMER REPRESENTATIVES

Your committee has recently had a consumer representative appointed to it. This document is to assist your group to gain the full benefit of having a consumer representative involved in your activities. Being a consumer representative can be a daunting experience when the consumer representative is the only lay member of a group of professionals and support from the Chairperson is appreciated and enables the consumer representative to be more effective.

Definition of a Consumer Representative

A consumer representative is a committee member who voices the consumer perspective and takes part in decision making processes on behalf of consumers. This person is usually nominated by, and is accountable to, an organisation of consumers. While their own experience as a consumer is important they are expected to take a broader perspective and represent the views of a particular group e.g. people with diabetes.

Purpose of Consumer Representatives

To bring a consumer perspective to the consultation and decision-making processes just as other members of the group bring theirs.

To obtain better health outcomes which is the common goal of consumer representatives and health service providers.

To ensure social justice for the more disadvantaged and marginalised members of the community.

Benefits of Consumer Representation on Committees

Consumer representatives provide a different view from health service providers.

Effective consumer representatives can and do add value to decision-making because they can assess problems from the consumer perspective and identify the consequences of both the problem and any proposed solutions.

If members of the group work together in bringing the knowledge and experience of each there will be a clear understanding of the consequences of particular decisions for those groups represented.

Things to Consider

There will be occasions when the consumer representative will need to consult with a wider constituency which will need additional time. However, consumer representatives are as good as their knowledge of the people they represent so it is important that consumer representatives are allowed the opportunity to consult when necessary.

Many boards, advisory bodies, departmental working parties and committees which include consumer representation include one or two consumer representatives with 5 to 10 industry and/or professional representatives. This significant imbalance can cause problems and a sense of isolation for consumer representatives. They find that:

Theirs is always a different viewpoint, the one which has to be justified and which is seen as a challenge by other members, and

As an individual member, they need to speak more frequently than any other because if they don't speak, the consumer perspective is not heard.

Confidentiality – the need for confidentiality of some information can make it difficult for consumer representatives to consult with other consumers. Potential conflict between the need for confidentiality and the need to consult can be avoided if it is clarified at the meeting what matters can be discussed publicly and what needs to be kept confidential.

Expense is a barrier to participation particularly as many representatives are not in the paid workforce and may be pensioners. Reimbursement of expenses such as parking fees, fuel/public transport costs if sitting fees are not available is appreciated by the representative. The use of email can carry with it considerable costs for printer cartridges, paper etc. If sending large documents to consumer representatives consider using ordinary mail as a means of reducing costs for the consumer representative.

How to Help the Consumer Representative be More Effective

Establish a relationship with the consumer representative

Ensure that all members of the group treat each other courteously and that everyone's ideas are treated seriously

Ensure that decisions are made with the whole group working together and reaching agreement

Make sure that every member of the group has an opportunity to speak on each issue

Apply the rules of natural justice

Make it clear to all members precisely what is confidential and what can be talked about and suggest how this might be done

Make sure everyone has access to the same information. This may mean making additional information available to those who are not part of the health service sector

Build cohesion and trust within the group

Deal immediately and effectively with conflict, difficult situations, and difficult people.

Ensure that documents are provided to consumer representatives in good time for meeting preparation.

References

Consumers Health Forum of Australia Inc. 2001. *Guidelines for Consumer Representatives*: Consumers Health Forum of Australia Inc.

Ministry of Consumer Affairs. 2004. *Consumer Representation: Guidelines for Chairperson Helping Consumer Representatives to be Effective*: Ministry of Consumer Affairs, New Zealand.

Adopted: October 2005