



# Tips for consumers working on committees

All around Australia and across all health sectors, consumers are getting involved in health organisations and services. They are expressing opinions on consumer and carer issues and becoming active in the design, planning and evaluation of services.

## Why do health and community organisations involve consumers?

- to improve health outcomes
- enhance the quality, safety and effectiveness of organisations
- understand the community's diverse cultures and particular needs
- provide appropriate and responsive organisations
- accreditation
- requirement of funding

## Why do consumers get involved?

- they are service users as consumers
- they are carers, family members, friends
- they have an interest in improving health outcomes
- they are community leaders
- .... and ALL of them want to bring about change!

## Consumers bring a unique perspective to organisations by:

- representing the views of a particular organisation or of a particular population, eg people with rare cancers providing their own views as past or current users of the service
- through their knowledge of a condition, eg as a carer of a person with cancer

## Consumers have a unique role on committees – it is to:

- protect the interests of consumers
- present the consumer perspective (how consumers think and feel)
- contribute consumer experiences

- ensure consumer concerns are recognised
- act as watchdog on issues
- provide information to the committee on issues affecting consumers
- ensure accountability to consumers
- report committee activities to consumers (if not confidential).

## 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.

## Some questions that consumers could 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 people whose outcomes are poor?
- What are training implications of the new initiative/program/service?

## 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!