



# Involving consumers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds



Whether you have already worked with communities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, or are about to involve them in your health organisation for the first time, it pays to be prepared. Doing a little bit of work to understand the important issues for these groups will be well worth the time.

- Identify migration history and length of community settlement in Australia.
- Familiarise yourself as much as possible with the basic historical, social, political and economic factors affecting these communities.
- If you will be holding meetings, consider cultural preferences for meeting places, times, gender mixes, etc.
- Integrate peers and volunteers to work with the organisation.
- Provide information in first language, use interpreters, and provide translated written information (including possible material from overseas).

According to the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health, an organisation involving this group of consumers should show its commitment to consumer involvement. You do this by the following:

- Identify your culturally and linguistically diverse consumers, both current and potential.
- Map current culturally and linguistically diverse consumer participation across the organisation.
- Ensure that your staff have appropriate skills, experience and confidence – this might mean an understanding of cultural and linguistic appropriateness, considerations for mentoring and supporting these consumers.
- Build and maintain ongoing links with ethno-specific organisations and communities as well as cultural associations to facilitate meaningful partnerships.

Addressing the language needs of culturally and linguistically diverse consumers is clearly essential for working with this group. These are a few suggestions for getting it right:

- Use interpreters or bilingual workers if necessary.
- Be mindful of consumers who may be illiterate in their own language.
- Investigate whether your consumers speak languages or dialects from a particular country of origin.
- Undertake research or consultation with community leaders or organisations which will help to determine which languages are appropriate, and what is the level of literacy of a particular community, not only in English but also in their own language.

How do you ensure that consultations or work with consumers from culturally and linguistically diverse communities is appropriate? Below are a few things to consider:

- Asking for individual opinions or feedback may not be a good fit with the collective orientation of some cultures.
- Satisfaction surveys may only elicit positive feedback from some culturally and linguistically diverse consumers, regardless of negative experience.
- Something that might be considered a traditional practice may not be appropriate for all culturally and linguistically diverse consumers in a particular community.
- Replicating practices from a consumer's country of origin may not take into account that these may be considered unjust by some members of the community, who may feel marginalised in their own community; examples of this might include how the status of women can differ between cultures.



- The key to assuring appropriate work with consumers is to ask, ask, ask. If possible, let them shape how their participation might occur.

How do you support consumers from these diverse communities to be effectively involved in organisations?

*'Support for culturally and linguistically diverse consumers may be different than that needed by other consumers due to their individual language needs, migration history, knowledge of the health system or cultural values and beliefs. What level and type of support is required will need to be established by working with the individual consumer'<sup>i</sup>.*

Some of the specific support mechanisms that you may offer to your culturally and linguistically diverse consumers are:

- Mentoring - to develop the consumer's knowledge of committee structures, the nature of the health system or information about the service provider. Health systems in other countries may be vastly different from Australia's.
- Mentoring – to enhance the consumer's knowledge and understanding of the concept of consumer participation, which in itself may be very unfamiliar.
- Briefing and debriefing - prior to meetings, for preparation and encouragement; following meetings, debriefing complex issues or difficult conversations. The group or committee should create an environment where the consumer feels supported to speak up and where staff avoid the use of jargon.
- Reimbursement and training – these are particularly important for this group of consumers. Reimbursement may be particularly important in smaller communities where there may be ongoing opportunities for participation and input, but only a few in the community who are able to commit their time due to other issues being a priority, such as housing and employment.

When working with a representative of a specific culturally and linguistically diverse community, you need to have an understanding of the links between the representative and the community being represented. Questions that may be asked include:

- How well-connected is the consumer to their community?
- How will feedback and consultation occur?
- How often will it occur?
- Is the representative being supported by the organisation to consult with communities on an ongoing basis?

Remember that there is great diversity within communities and, therefore, the views of all community members cannot be represented by a small number of people; community views may be conflicting. Knowing this, you might ask your consumers to try to present the most dominant view in a community, to talk about the spectrum of viewpoints and think about which views might be marginalised. *'Culture itself is dynamic and changes with migration experiences, time spent in different countries, generations and interaction with other cultures.'*<sup>ii</sup>

Another issue common to all consumer representatives, not only to culturally and linguistically diverse consumers, is the issue of over-representation. You may find that the same few people from the target community volunteer every time. This may be a more common issue in these communities where factors like strong English language skills, understanding of the Australian health system or community status may all play a role. This may not pose a problem but it's important to clarify whether the views of others are being heard. Both you and your consumer will need to make clear the specific target group that is being represented (e.g. women, the elderly, youth, people with a particular illness, etc.). As an organisation, aim at inclusion not only representation.



Related to the issue of over-representation is the issue of consumer fatigue. If you are able to recruit a larger group of people to represent community views, that may assist in sustaining input over time. Fatigue may emerge due to the obligations felt by consumers to the community they are representing. Organisations can lessen this pressure by limiting the amount of time a representative sits on a committee, by rotating different representatives through different functions, or by means of a co-ordinated approach to consumer participation organisation-wide.

## References

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Centre for Cultural Ethnicity and Health. 2005. A Practical Guide to CALD Consumer Participation. Centre for Cultural Ethnicity and Health. Victoria

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Cultural Ethnicity and Health. 2005. A Practical Guide to CALD Consumer Participation. Centre for Cultural Ethnicity and Health. Victoria. p.11.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>i</sup> Centre for Cultural Ethnicity and Health. 2005. A Practical Guide to CALD Consumer Participation. Centre for Cultural Ethnicity and Health. Victoria. p.11.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

