

Health Consumers Queensland (HCQ) Communique

From the Committee

History was made on Sunday, 14 September 2008 when the inaugural HCQ Ministerial Consumer Advisory Committee (Committee) met for the first time in Brisbane.

The 13 Committee members shared their knowledge of the health environment, their personal contributions to health consumerism, identifying ongoing life experience and understanding of consumer engagement, participation and advocacy at the local, state, national and/or international levels and their expectations for a high quality health system. Each person on the Committee brought to the table a balance of views and consumer perspectives enhanced by their high level affiliations with a broad range of health-related groups and other social service networks.

During the course of the two-day meeting, members discussed the 'bigger picture', the state, national and international perspectives in relation to the current health environment with input from guest presenters, Kathy Kendall, Coordinator, Health Consumers Network and Michael Tennant and Jeremy Kirby from Queensland Health. The Committee and speakers identified the importance of involving consumers, right from the initial planning phase of any health reform process through to health resource allocation and the evaluation of implemented change.

The Committee recognised that it must be seen as a credible force for change to deliver quality health outcomes for statewide health consumers. They affirmed their key goals of consumer empowerment; broad consumer and community engagement and participation; the inclusion of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities; promotion of diversity; gaining the trust of Queenslanders; and systemic change, where possible.

Their initial discussion encompassed a range of administrative and operational functions, including the development of a resource manual to inform the work of HCQ. There was consensus that media and communication protocols be developed to guide relationships between Committee members, the Secretariat, Queensland Health, the Minister for Health, statutory and community organisations and the wider community.

The Committee nominated members to form a small working party to develop HCQ's vision statement and corresponding values/principles. In addition, they tasked me as chairperson, to work with the Secretariat to explore the benefits of and options around implementing a statewide Consumer Register and to research effective procedures to get it up and running as soon as practicable. This work will inform the Committee's development of an action plan and priorities in negotiation with the Minister for Health.

The Committee will workshop the action plan on 6 and 7 November 2008, focusing on the key objectives of consumer engagement, capacity building and a framework to guide advocacy support. The plan will be available from the end of November 2008

and will demonstrate the Committee's commitment to encouraging the involvement of health consumers in the decisions about their own care and in planning, implementation, evaluation activities and policy development at the service/program/ward level, at an organisational or district level and at the community and statewide level.

Following the two days of orientation, the Committee and Secretariat attended the National Citizen Engagement Forum in Brisbane. The Australian Institute of Health Policy Studies facilitated this enlightening event, with forum participants demonstrating 'expert' knowledge and endorsement of citizen, consumer and community engagement as the medium for quality reform. Inspiring speakers shared their understanding of public engagement as an ethical and democratic right of all citizens and that longer term relationships need to be established between all stakeholders for meaningful, ongoing participation and consultation.

It was further identified that policy and practice are inextricably linked - the legitimacy and sustainability of any public policy depends on citizen involvement and actively listening to the consumer's journey. Also, organisational culture and the focus of discourse can be changed, tokenism can be isolated and citizens provided with good quality information, education and mentoring to have the confidence and skills to engage with the health system across all levels. Further, semantics over labels, names and definitions (e.g. patient/service user/consumer/citizen) distracts from the main game - the partnership approach to safe, effective and quality care and service delivery.

The Committee believes consumer participation in health reforms positively benefits consumers, the community and government. It ensures end users are more informed and included in balanced decision-making about health issues and that 'hidden' issues are uncovered for positive outcomes for all citizens.

Mark Tucker-Evans
Chairperson
Health Consumers Queensland
Ministerial Consumer Advisory Committee
19 September 2008