

## Health Consumers Queensland submission

### Inquiry into the performance of the Queensland Health Ombudsman's functions pursuant to section 179 of the Health Ombudsman Act 2013

Queensland Parliament

Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention  
Committee

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## About us

Health Consumers Queensland is the peak organisation representing the interests of health consumers and carers in the state. Health Consumers Queensland is a not-for-profit organisation and a registered health promotion charity and we believe in improving health outcomes for people in Queensland.

*Consumers are people who use, or are potential users, of health services including their family and carers. Consumers may participate as individuals, groups, organizations of consumers, consumer representatives or communities.*

Our priority focus is on consumer engagement that influences and leads improvements and delivers better health outcomes for all Queenslanders. We achieve this through our Queensland-wide health consumer network, tailored training and skills development programs, and maximising opportunities for consumer representation at all levels of the health system.

*Consumer engagement is when health consumers actively participate in their own healthcare and in health policy, planning, service delivery and evaluation at service and agency levels.*

### **OUR MISSION**

Health Consumers Queensland empowers Queensland consumers to lead and drive better health outcomes.

### **OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES:**

Health Consumers Queensland is committed to:

- Influencing individual and system change in health services through ensuring the consumer perspective is central in the planning, design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation at all levels.
- Partnerships and collaboration with organisations, service providers and stakeholders.
- Quality, safe, affordable, timely and accessible services that deliver the right care, at the right time and the right place.

### **DIVERSITY**

All people have a right to affordable and accessible health services that meet all of their physical, social, emotional and cultural preferences.

Health Consumers Queensland focus on increasing the voices of vulnerable population groups and assist them to understand how they can have a voice in developing health services. With access and equity in mind, we partner with people and organisations with a focus on the following:

- Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)
- Physical and intellectual disability
- Lived mental health experience
- Socially and geographically isolated
- Socioeconomically disadvantaged

**Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1: The OHO provide regular strategic advice to local health services about how to identify and remove the barriers that consumers face when seeking better care.**

**Recommendation 2: That consideration be given to conduct an independent assessment of the experience of consumers who seek to make complaints at both a local service level as well as through the Office of the Health Ombudsman.**

**Recommendation 3: That consideration be given to provide independent advocates to walk alongside consumers through their complaints process (a different role to the OHO officers who record and manage complaints). These could also include those with a focus on supporting CALD and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers.**

**Recommendation 4: Further promotion of the functions of the Office of the Health Ombudsman to the community through a public awareness campaign.**

**Recommendation 5: The Patient Safety Improvement Service publish a regular, consumer-friendly snapshot of complaints across Queensland that combines HHS, private and OHO data. This should reflect the main issues raised in complaints and the timeliness of resolution.**

**Recommendation 6: We would support adoption of the National model.**

**The operation of the health service complaints management system & ways in which the health service complaints management system might be improved**

Health Consumers Queensland is focused on building the capacity of both Queensland consumers, carers and families as well as health professionals, to partner to shape the health system into one which provides consumer-focused care. Our work is focused on growing meaningful consumer engagement at a systems level through mechanisms such as consumer representation on high level or advisory committees, input into strategic planning, analysis of safety and quality information, etc.

However at an individual service delivery level:

*Complaints are an important source of feedback as they help healthcare services to improve the quality of their service. They also reduce the likelihood of a problem happening again for someone else.<sup>1</sup>*

Our organisation encourages consumers to first attempt to convey their dissatisfaction with delivery of care in a timely manner at the local level.<sup>2</sup> This can result in the quickest rectification of their own issue and hopefully ensure it doesn't happen to subsequent patients.

However sometimes a consumer may fear that they or their loved one's care might be compromised if they speak up. At other times they may not be satisfied with the response they receive from the health professional or local health service. These experiences are signs that the complaints mechanisms of a local health service need to be strengthened.

An increased focus on patient-centered care through the National Safety and Quality Health Services Standards as well as central reporting of complaints data to Queensland Health has meant all HHSs have been required to continually review their complaints figures and processes. This process needs to be complimented by a sophisticated tracking of complaints trends. For instance a reduction of complaints may not mean care is improving, but may be a sign that consumers are dissatisfied with how the local service is responding to complaints and consequently choosing not to provide

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<sup>1</sup> P. 53 Getting the Healthcare you need: An advocacy toolkit for people using the healthcare system in Queensland (Health Consumers Queensland, May 2011).

[https://www.health.qld.gov.au/hcq/publications/hcq\\_toolkit\\_may11.pdf](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/hcq/publications/hcq_toolkit_may11.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Complaints and Feedback, Health Consumers Queensland website <http://www.hcq.org.au/for-health-consumers-carers/complaints-and-feedback/>

feedback. This may also be reflected in an increase in complaints to the OHO about that local service.

A well functioning complaints system at a local level should reduce the number of complaints being received by the OHO.

**Recommendation 1: The OHO provide regular strategic advice to local health services about how to identify and remove the barriers that consumers face when seeking better care.**

Health Consumers Queensland invited members of our statewide network of consumers, carers and health professionals to inform this submission by providing feedback to us on their experiences of seeking assistance through the Office of the Health Ombudsman. The number of respondents was not high (11), which may be linked to lack of capacity or time to respond, lack of awareness of the OHO or not having needing to use their services.

However those who did take the time to respond to our survey shared many similar concerns about their dissatisfaction of the OHO complaints process. They reported feeling that their complaints were not taken seriously or treated fairly, that the process was onerous on them, they had issues around timeliness and they had concerns about how much impact the OHO can have in improving the culture of a health service. One respondent has chosen not to submit a complaint because of a perception that the OHO held a positive bias towards health professionals and lacked fair assessment of complaints.

These comments warrant much broader, independent consultation of Queensland health consumers to ascertain their impressions about the function and effectiveness of the OHO, their experience of the current complaints mechanism, and what needs to be strengthened within the system to improve their experience. This dovetails with their experience of the complaints processes at a local level, so this should be included in the scope.

**Recommendation 2: That consideration be given to conduct an independent assessment of the experience of consumers who seek to make complaints at both a local service level as well as through the Office of the Health Ombudsman.**

These consultations could also seek clarity from the community if they are aware of the role and function of the OHO. This is likely to find populations who are not aware, including those who may be less willing to speak up about their care. This raises the need for greater supports for those who do make a complaint through the OHO.

**Recommendation 3: That consideration be given to provide independent advocates to walk alongside consumers through their complaints process (a different role to the OHO officers who record and manage complaints). These could also include those with a focus on supporting CALD and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers.**

**Recommendation 4: Further promotion of the functions of the Office of the Health Ombudsman to the community through a public awareness campaign.**

For greater transparency and in order to improve the health system based on current consumer-feedback, the central Department should have a greater role in analysing complaints data across the HHSs, private facilities and the OHO. This should be released on a regular basis in a format that is easily understood by Queenslanders and can assist all health organisations to improve their complaints processes.

**Recommendation 5: The Patient Safety Improvement Service publish a regular, consumer-friendly snapshot of complaints across Queensland that combines HHS, private and OHO data. This should reflect the main issues raised in complaints and the timeliness of resolution.**

**Review the National Boards' and National Agency's performance of their functions relating to the health, conduct and performance of registered health practitioners who provide health services in Queensland**

Whilst we are unable to comment on the National Boards' and National Agency's performance of their functions relating to the health, conduct and performance of registered health practitioners who provide health services in Queensland we believe that the duplication in the function of the Health Ombudsman and AHPRA causes confusion and is to the detriment of consumers.

**Recommendation 6: We would support adoption of the National model.**