

How to support consumers with healthcare decisions

Strategic Communications Branch

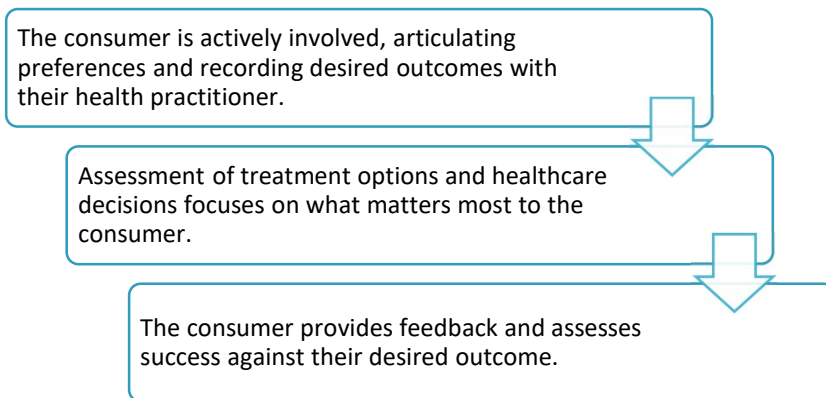
There is widespread consumer support for taking a shared decision-making approach to healthcare decisions – one which empowers the consumer to take an active role in their own healthcare. This factsheet summarises what consumers want from resources to help them to articulate their desired health outcomes and decide on their preferred treatment option.



The role of consumers and practitioners



The stages of a consumer decision-making process



Consumers have low awareness of decision support resources, and related content is hard to find on Queensland Health and HHS websites.

Suggestions to increase awareness and visibility include:

- Make consumer decision resources easier to find online.
- Support healthcare professionals to offer resources at appointments.
- Take a statewide approach to resources, with a suite of material that has consistent messaging and look and feel.
- Support tailoring of resources to meet the needs of local audiences.

Increasing consumers' knowledge and use of the resources will bolster their confidence and increase their engagement in healthcare decisions.

Consumers like existing resources when they're made aware of them.

For example, 80% of respondents rated Choosing Wisely Australia's 5 Questions as easy to understand, helpful when making health decisions and helpful to understand treatment options, while 77% also agreed these were the right questions.

These resources were preferred over the BRAN and BRANND resources, although consumers saw the value of an acronym (easy to remember, attention-grabbing).

Similarly, 80% of respondents rated The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care's Top Tips for Safe Health Care as easy to understand and helpful when making health decisions, while 75% rated them as helpful to understand treatment options and a similar proportion agreed they were the right tips.

World Health Organisation (WHO) insights

The WHO defines health literacy as 'the cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health'.

While communications alone will not solve the issue they do help to educate and raise awareness of positive health behaviours.

Reflecting the WHO's communication principles – accessible, relevant, actionable, timely, credible and understandable – in resources can help make them more effective.

"I would actually like some sort of picture of possible pathways, showing clearly when a decision locks you into one particular pathway" - consumer survey respondent

Channel considerations:

- Raise awareness of resources before healthcare appointments.
- Outdoor and digital were suggested.
- Make use of Queensland Health Channels - outpatient letters, digital screens, yourQH, websites, outpatient clinic areas.
- Raise awareness among healthcare professionals via peak bodies, professional associations, screen savers, QHEPS.

Design considerations:

- Short and simple instructional messaging.
- Use examples and tell real patient stories.
- Consistent messages in plain English.
- Include diagrams and pictures.
- Use culturally appropriate imagery.
- Video, audio (podcast) and braille options.
- Links (or QR codes) to further information and where the consumer can ask questions.
- Engage health consumer groups to review or co-design materials.

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Consumer decision resources should be specific to the patient's journey. They should support the right care in the right place at the right time, and cover short and long term risks, recovery, tests and treatment options.

Feedback from consumers indicates that **existing resources don't include everything needed for decision making**, and could be improved with:

- The benefits of asking questions and understanding the different available treatment options, to show how engaging in healthcare decisions has a positive impact on their ultimate health outcome.
- Questions consumers can ask to help understand the risks and benefits of treatment options, as well as alternatives (including doing nothing).
- Conversation starters or how to ask questions and help make their needs known (based on their values, social, or emotional needs).
- What else consumers can do to help them understand the different treatment options available.
- Acronyms are a good way to help remember but alone do not provide enough information to aid action.
- The benefits of bringing a friend or family member to appointments, for example, to help support asking questions and their decision-making.

"Consumers need to know what to ask and they need to be able to understand the information they are given" - consumer survey respondent

Some examples of best practice include:

- The National Health Service (NHS) Scotland's ["What matters to you?"](#) website. This site focuses on outcomes and preferences that matter to consumers and includes a targeted event around 6 June each year.
- [Kidney Health Australia](#) observes the WHO communication principles with its online decision-making tool and factsheet on making the most of your trip to the doctor.

The communication principles for consumer decision making resources can be summarised as:

1. A consistent, state-wide approach to the development and promotion of resources to aid healthcare decisions.
2. An accessible design.
3. Communication tactics that support decision-making at every stage of the customer journey.
4. Content that answers why, how and when to ask questions to support consumer healthcare decisions.
5. Information on next steps or where to go to find out more.
6. Support and information for healthcare professionals too.
7. Reviewing new resources or content with consumers to make sure they meet their needs, are engaging and follow the WHO communication principles.

In consumers' words:

"If you go to any hospital in Queensland, you should expect the same approach and every staff member moving between hospitals should expect to use the same approach" - consumer survey respondent.

"For our Doctors to initiate these conversation in a supportive way that allows us to process and does not pressure us especially if we need time or want to explore another option" - consumer survey respondent

I want to know what my life will be like in 6 days, 6 weeks, 6 months" - consumer survey respondent

Healthcare professionals:

Healthcare professionals could be supported to better understand the benefits of this process to their role and to the health system.

They also require support to make sure the conversation happens for every person, every time. Tips for healthcare professionals include:

- Take time to understand what the consumer wants and what is most important for them in the context of their life. Acknowledge their needs and ask 'What matters to you?'
- Use active listening – ask a range of question types and summarise the responses.
- Discuss options, including benefits, risks and doing nothing.
- Check the consumer's understanding, by asking them to summarise or asking 'Do you have any questions?'
- Discuss next steps, so consumers know what to expect and when.
- Provide printouts and detail where they can get more information, including what to do if they have questions after the appointment.

Note: time with a healthcare professional (short appointment times) is also a barrier. Other work is happening in the health system to increase uptake among health professionals.

The Strategic Communication Branch commissioned Health Consumers Queensland to conduct the *Helping consumers with decisions* project, 10 March 2021, this summary prepared by the Branch summarises the findings. Research methodologies used in this short-term 'discovery phase' project included a literature scan, desktop review, a review of Kitchen Table Discussion reports, structured interviews with Hospital and Health Service engagement staff and consumer leads, and a consumer survey.