

COVID and the plague of ideas that has sparked change

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Australians' experience with COVID-19 has stimulated more active consumer and community involvement in health care decision-making, the Consumer Health Forum says.

Authors writing in CHF's ejournal, *Health Voices*, published today report on a range of developments spurred by COVID where consumers are having an influence.

A standout has been Health Consumers Queensland which during COVID has formed working links with the State's Health Department to develop consumer-effective policies, promoting online engagement with consumers to alert government on a range of areas including delayed access to health care, advice on testing and face masks.

The CEO of CHF, Leanne Wells, said a feature of the many of the 20 articles in this edition was the diversity of ways in which COVID had generated changes in thinking and services to meet the crisis.

"The rush of the authorities to respond in the early stages of COVID-19 meant the value of consumer and community knowledge was often overlooked," Ms Wells said.

"But what followed that initial response was a greater realisation of the importance of community and consumer input in shaping more thoughtful and effective ways to counter COVID.

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“These included involving consumer representatives in the [National COVID-19 Clinical Evidence Taskforce](#), which has developed the ‘Living Evidence’ approach now gaining momentum around the world.

“Other consumer involvement has come through Primary Health Networks in responding to the fallout of a major Melbourne lockdown. Another outcome of COVID has been the fresh recognition given to the views and experience of those living with chronic conditions.

“As Health Consumer Queensland’s Melissa Fox reported, if you continue to keep consumers at arms’ length, “it will be found that the current approach to engagement was lacking. And it will be found to have contributed to poorer outcomes.”

“However as the articles in *Health Voices* demonstrate, we still have much scope to advance consumer involvement.”

Consumer advocate, Laila Hallam says COVID has been the disruptor that exposed how lightly consumer representatives are embedded in health service decision making. COVID responses made without consumer stakeholders present as peers cannot be patient-centred, she says. Now is the time for systems to acknowledge, commit, embrace and re-connect with its consumer representatives, bring them into the fold as peers, and together re-imagine the future for the benefit of all.

Health innovation leader, Professor Jeffery Braithwaite, says that while telehealth was the most ubiquitous of changes brought forward by the pandemic, other forms of virtual care have also been implemented, such as a “virtual ward” at a Sydney teaching hospital and the successful development mobile testing clinics.

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“As he says in the depths of such problems, communities can rally to solve problems together: staying in touch and remaining connected,” Ms Wells said.

“A convincing example of this has been the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their leadership in preventing COVID.

“COVID has also seen many more young people turning to youth-centred chats to link with others experiencing emotional and mental challenges, paving stronger pathways post-pandemic.”

“That message from young people should give us hope that the future can be brighter for us all,” Ms Wells said.

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