

Fact Sheet

Information for Consumer Representatives

Checklist: How committee secretariats can support consumer representatives

Committee secretariats can often enhance the contribution of a consumer representative on a particular committee by thinking through ways to support their involvement. In 2003, the Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) and representatives of committee secretariats developed a checklist for how committees can support consumer representatives as part of a project funded by the Department of Health. Although the checklist is not exhaustive, it provides some useful pointers.

Before the meeting

Touch base well before the meeting and brief the consumer representative:

- Provide the terms of reference and describe the committee's role in lay terms.
- Provide background information and explain key issues. This may include annual reports, websites, journal articles, previous committee papers and terms of reference.
- Provide information about the Chair, other members of the committee and the organisations they represent.
- If the committee has already met, provide all the information so the consumer representative can catch up.
- Minimise or explain jargon used in discussions and in papers, include a glossary of terms.
- Find out how the consumer representative would prefer to be contacted. Remember that consumer representatives may not be able to print large documents and not all will have email.
- Clarify what the arrangements are for the first meeting. Have the needs of all participants including the consumer representative been considered?

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- Send agenda and papers well in advance of the meeting date (at least one week). Remember that postal times vary between states and territories, for example, even express post can take at least two days to Western Australia.
- Minimise the upfront costs for the consumer representative. Book and pay for travel and accommodation. Send cab vouchers in advance if possible. Use a free-phone number or phone the participants for teleconferences. Provide a toll-free number or offer to return a consumer representative's call.
- Be clear from the outset about the committee guidelines for covering costs.

At the meeting

The Chair is key in establishing the role of the consumer representative on the committee. It is good practice to:

- Welcome and introduce the consumer representative to the rest of the committee at the start of the meeting and ask other members of the committee to introduce themselves.
- Wear name tags or sit behind name plates.
- Ensure other committee members are aware of the role of a consumer representative and the reasons for their involvement.
- Ensure the consumer representative has the opportunity to express a viewpoint.
- Explain or avoid jargon or abbreviations.
- Help the consumer representative build relationships by introducing them to others.
- Encourage consumer representatives to add issues to the agenda and ensure s/he is involved in any informal discussions.
- Make arrangements for the next meeting.

After the meeting

- Promptly pay sitting fees and reimburse any expenses (such as food, mileage, parking).
- Explain the process your organisation uses for making payment.
- Check how the consumer representative found the meeting and whether there is anything you can do to improve this experience.

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- Do all members of the committee accept and understand the role of the consumer representative? It is up to the secretariat and the Chair to help all committee members work well with one another. Consider contacting CHF for resources if needed to clarify the role of the consumer representative.
- If further orientation would be helpful, consider arranging for the consumer representative to work with other committee members. This builds relationships between them and helps the consumer representative to learn more about the topic under discussion.
- Consider whether one consumer representative is enough. If there is strong representation of other interest groups on the committee then you may need to strengthen the consumer representation.
- Consider whether wider consumer consultation is needed on a particular topic. The consumer representative can speak on behalf of other consumers in their constituency and will consult with them in order to inform their own input to the committee. If you need more detailed input or to know the views of a larger group of consumers, then you may need to commission a consultation. The consumer representative could provide input on how this should be done or what should be included in it.

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