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Better practice guidelines on complaints management

Q. What is the Council doing with regards to improving complaints management in Australian health care settings?

- A.** The Council, in collaboration with other key health care bodies, has developed national guidelines for better practice complaints management for health care services.

Q. Why are these guidelines necessary?

- A.** The aim of the guidelines is to promote better practice in complaints management by health care services, and to improve the link to safety and quality improvements.

Consumer complaints are a unique source of information for health care services about the needs of consumers and the quality of care. Open discussion of consumers' concerns and complaints helps health care professionals and services to understand potential problems, and to identify ways to improve the service.

The better practice guidelines also aim to address the need for cultural change within the health care sector in relation to complaints. Health care professionals have tended to dismiss complaints as an unjustified or unwelcome challenge to their professional competence and commitment. Promoting positive attitudes to consumer feedback about the quality of care, including complaints, is therefore crucial.

Q. What are some of the common problems in relation to complaints management within the health care sector?

- A.** Lack of proper acknowledgment and poor follow-up are among the most common areas of dissatisfaction with complaints processes.

The outcomes people most commonly seek when complaining to health care services include an explanation, an apology, a desire for the health care provider to show they care, to be given reassurance and sympathy, and to prevent the same thing happening to other people.

Q. Are the guidelines applicable to all health care services?

- A.** Yes. The guidelines incorporate relevant policies of state and territory departments of health, the national *Open Disclosure Standard 2003*, standards of accreditation programs, and relevant Australian and International Standards. The guidelines also take into account the applicable laws and policies of professional indemnity organisations, and professional standards.

Q. Can these guidelines be easily applied within health care organisations?

- A.** To assist health care organisations, a *Complaints Management Handbook* has been developed to provide practical information on how to implement the practices described in the guidelines.

Q. How can I find out more about the Better Practice Guidelines on Complaints Management?

- A.** More information on the work of the Council can be obtained by visiting the Council's website at www.safetyandquality.org, or by contacting the:

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