

## Consumer Health Complaints reference group communiqué

September 2023

### Working together to improve the consumer health complaints experience

The Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) together with the National Boards and the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (the Commission) have been working together on a project to improve the consumer experience of making a health complaint in Australia.

#### Who's involved?

In 2021 Ahpra and the Commission established a reference group to provide advice and guidance on the planned work, including the joint project approach, stakeholder engagement and potential areas of focus for Ahpra and the Commission. The reference group brings together voices from the consumer and health profession perspectives, and includes representation from health consumer organisations, Ahpra's [Community Advisory Council](#) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Strategy Group, professional associations and the National Boards.

Recognising that Ahpra is one of many bodies managing consumer health complaints, we have also sought regular engagement with health complaints entities in each state and territory.

#### What's happening?

The project has focused on ensuring that the consumer experience of making a health complaint is better understood. Working with consumer members on the reference group, the project team has consulted with health consumer organisations in each state and territory and also sought perspectives from consumers with a lived experience of making a health complaint.

Ongoing consultation with professional associations and professional indemnity insurers has also provided insights on the challenges and opportunities for health providers.

In better understanding the barriers for consumers making a complaint or raising a concern, the project aims to identify what further actions Ahpra and the Commission can take to support consumers. The early phase of work involved listening to consumers, service providers and key stakeholders about their experiences with health complaints.

Initial consultation found that consumers felt complaints handling systems and responses at health practitioner and health service levels could be improved. A key theme across states and territories was that consumers often don't know where to start when making a complaint, and better guidance about the roles and focus of complaints bodies and potential outcomes of complaints processes is required to help navigate complaints processes.

In examining resources already available to help consumers planning to make a complaint, the reference group identified clearer guidance for consumers about pathways for making a complaint was needed and that simple advice to support consumers would also be useful.

Practitioner groups agreed, through consultation, that local complaints handling could be improved. It was noted that practitioner understanding of the different complaint organisations, their roles and complaints options was not strong.

From the health provider perspective, dealing with complaints can be confronting and stressful however, most practitioners and health services aim to deal with negative feedback and complaints promptly and respectfully. Feedback was that further information about navigating the complaints system and resources about complaints management would help support better management of complaints locally.

Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency  
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A gap in resources for health providers managing complaints was also called out, particularly health practitioners practising solo or in smaller services without organisation support for complaints management.

### **What's next?**

The joint project's first output is a checklist that aims to help practitioners handle direct feedback and complaints themselves. The checklist will be published in early October. It incorporates lessons from our consultation with consumers, professional associations, health providers and complaints bodies.

The findings to date have highlighted some areas that Ahpra and the Commission can influence to improve the consumer experience of making a complaint. This includes consistency of messaging across both organisations' websites and resources, as well as further education and guidance to support strengthening the complaints culture and complaints handling processes at the local level.

Ahpra will also be updating its complaints webpage in October to provide clearer and simpler messages for consumers and practitioners about navigating the complaints process and where to direct complaints.

Plans are also progressing to develop a resource for consumers based on consumer feedback. Development will include testing by consumers with a lived experience of making a health complaint.

The reference group's last meeting, at which an end of project report will be tabled, is on 5 December 2023.