

**Committed to Participate
Session 1 Consumers payments**

Consumer perspectives on whether or not consumers on committees should be paid.

Presented by Twanny Farrugia, Pro-Ability Consultancy Service

ABSTRACT

The debate about whether 'Consumers' should be paid for participating on committees in relation to health care has been vigorous for many years. That debate continues here today. Current literature predominantly presented by professionals which though important does not fully exploring the consumer's experience. Therefore, it could be suggested that the debate is skewed. Furthermore, the limited policies on this subject vary from one organisation to another but the majority of them concur that Consumer Representatives should be paid. Given we have an Australian culture of volunteering, an 'opting out' option should be written in the policies to allow the individual Consumer to decide if they wish to be paid or not. Accordingly, the presenter, rather than presenting a formal conclusion has allowed the consumers to provide a list of recommendations which represent their experiences on this topic. Therefore, it is suggested these recommendations are considered by your organisation in assisting development of appropriate policies on whether or not Consumers being paid for their participation on your committees.

The Debate Continues

The debate whether 'Consumers' should be paid for participating on committees in relation to health care have been vigorous for many years. That debate continues here today.

The Literature and Existing Policies

There are many pros and cons on this topic and the vast majority of the literature around this issue is written by professionals. Although that side of the debate is important there seems to be something missing. The literature does not seem to represent the experience of the consumers, therefore, it could be suggested that this debate has been skewed. Accordingly, given the topic at hand, today's paper will be presented from the consumer's perspective.

From the literature it would appear that limited policy has been developed across the board for payment of 'Consumer Participation.' However, it has been left to each individual organisation as to whether or not they develop such a policy.

Irrespective of the type of organisation (i.e., government, non-government or the not-for-profit sector) an active decision should be made about reimbursement of costs and or additional payments for Consumer Participation.

Quote from one of the existing policy.

"...promptly reimburse costs incurred by community members in their participation responsibilities, such as travel, child care, accommodation, carer and any other reasonable expenses....."

Department of Human Services (Vic), Rural and Regional Health and Aged Care Services Division, *Community Advisory Committee Guidelines*, Victorian Public Health Services, Melbourne, May 2006.

Some of the organisations that do have a policy on this subject are the National Health and Medical Research; Department of Human Services Victoria (different divisions have different policies on this subject); Department of Health; Inner South East Partnership in Community and Health; Health Consumer Council; Consumer Health Forum; Health Issue Centre and the Office of Mental Health just to mention a few.

Quote from one of the existing policy.

"Health Issues Centre recommends that organisations who invite consumers, carers and community members to have input into the planning of services and programs offer consumers a suitable payment for their contribution and reimburse all of their out-of-pocket expenses associated with their participation."

Health Issue Centre, *Policy on Paying Consumer, Carers and Community Members*, Melbourne, 15 May 2008.

Additionally, the policies that have been written vary from organisation to organisation. However, the majority endorses the principle of paying Consumer Representatives a sitting fee together with out of pocket expenses.

Consumer's Feedback

Furthermore, given that Australia have a culture of 'Volunteering' a number of these policies which recommend payment of a sitting fee have an option to 'opt out' if they don't want to be paid.

Through these observations and wanting to represent the "Consumer's" perspective, consumers were canvassed for their views and present them here today.

Accordingly, following is a list of "Pros and Cons" together with recommendations representing my own and the experience of other consumers.

Hopefully, this will allow you, to take this feed back/information provided by consumers back to your organisation; discuss it and reach your own decisions/conclusions whether or not to pay consumers who are or will be participating in your organisation.

Consumer's Comments:

FOR:

- Some consumers see that other health professionals are paid as part of their salary position and therefore feel they should be paid for their time and expertise
- Other consumers are financially struggling and therefore feel that financial compensation will help them to participate
- Some suggested that when payment is not offered, a number of consumers would be excluded from contributing to that committee
- Payment recognises the value of work done while acknowledging the knowledge and skills required to participate
- Payment places the consumer on an equal footing with other Committee members who are not consumers. This avoids the 'them and us' mentality.
- Apart from financial payment, payment in kind is also acceptable (e.g., lunch, gift voucher, training, field trips etc.)
- Should the Consumer wish to 'opt out' they can still take the fee and donate it to a charity of their choice

Consumer Comments

AGAINST:

- Other consumers consider themselves as volunteers and therefore don't see payment necessary.
- Volunteering comes from the heart and soul and not the pocket book.
- Some feel that payment can compromise their objectivity
- Many consumers do other volunteer work and do not perceive sitting on different committees as a career path. They view it as a way of giving some thing back. Therefore, the money is not a deciding factor.

Consumer Comments

Recommendations:

The following recommendations are based on my own participation on various committees over the past 30 years, feedback from consumers and other health professionals. Furthermore, these recommendations are in line with the existing policies of existing organisations that provide payment to consumers.

1. All consumer positions should be paid a sitting fee with an option to opt out if people want to.
2. For Consumers wishing to 'opt out' and either not take a fee or donate it to charity; then this should be negotiated in confidence and privately. Such action will avoid embarrassing those Consumers who do need to take that fee.
3. All consumers should be reimbursed out of pocket expenses such as:
 - Taxi fares
 - Public transport
 - Petrol and parking costs
 - Air fares
 - Accommodation
 - Telephone calls
 - Meals
 - Child care for consumers who are parents
 - Respite care for consumers who are carers
 - Reading and preparation time.
4. Where ever possible, organisations should include sitting fees and reimbursement in their funding applications.
5. Selection process should ensure Consumers have the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience needed to accomplish the given tasks required by the committee they are participating on.
6. Committees need to provide Consumers with the appropriate tools required to fully participate and complete the tasks required.
7. Ensure that the appropriate organisation has or is developing policies to cover the above recommendations.

The Final Analysis:

"The most important thing our health service has learnt in running an effective community advisory committee is listening to the members themselves and recognising that they are the EXPERTS when it comes to understanding the consumer perspective."

(Melbourne Health community advisory committee, Victorian Consumers Participate in Health Conference, Melbourne, October 2005)

"If we accept the notion that consumers are EXPERTS when it comes to understanding the consumer perspective" "Then....."

1. Can you afford not to have them in your organisation?
2. Do any EXPERTS you hire for your organisation come for free?
3. Do you hire EXPERTS in your organisation without developing a Policy to cover this area of importance?

That brings us to the end of this presentation. I hope that the above questions will engender further discussions in your organisation to enable you in developing policy on this subject; whether or not to pay consumers who participate on any of your existing or future committees.

Bibliography

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