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Introduction

These guidelines, on a health service approach to the handling of complaints and suggestions, have been produced in response to a specific commitment in the National Health Strategy - *Quality and Fairness - A Health System for You* that "best practice models of customer care including a statutory system of complaint handling will be introduced". (Action 49). The guidelines can be used by all health service providers to ensure the that principle of "people - centredness" which is at the heart of the strategy becomes an increasingly important feature of how we plan and deliver services.

These guidelines are the second in a series covering a range of actions set out in the Strategy. They were prepared by a team drawn from the health services and have been accepted by the C.E.O.s of the health boards and by the Management Advisory Committee of the Department of Health and Children.

The guidelines themselves are not intended to be prescriptive but rather they reflect the approach adopted by the Health Strategy Implementation Group of giving national leadership while promoting local ownership. As such the guidelines should provide a useful framework for developing an approach to handling complaints and suggestions at each level throughout the health service.

It is the desire of the Implementation Group that these will be living guidelines, which will develop and evolve over the coming years.

Finally I would like to thank the project team, who within a very short timescale, worked exceptionally hard to produce these guidelines.

Denis Doherty

Director

The Health Boards Executive

1. Purpose of these guidelines

Action 49 of the Health Strategy *Quality and Fairness : A Health System for You* requires each agency to have in place and maintain a system for the handling of complaints and suggestions. This document sets out the health service approach and guidelines for the handling of complaints and suggestions, for implementation at individual agency level.

2. Complaints and suggestions

The majority of patients, clients and their families who use health services experience high standards of care and treatment, benefiting from the kindness and dedication of the staff who look after them. However, there can be instances where standards of practice can be perceived to fall short of what a patient or client finds acceptable. It is important that there are simple and effective arrangements to deal with these situations.

Complaints procedures provide an opportunity to put things right for the patients, clients and their families as well as improving services. It is also important to listen sympathetically to people who have a complaint. A positive rather than a defensive response is required.

Complaints from patients, clients and their families can provide a useful additional means of monitoring the quality of services. Constructive comments and suggestions also provide a useful insight into existing problems and offer new ideas which can be used to improve services. Dealing with those who have made complaints provides an opportunity to establish a positive relationship with the complainant and to develop an understanding of their needs.

Definition of a complaint: 'An expression of dissatisfaction which needs a response'

The vision adopted for the future health system, outlined in the Health Strategy Quality and Fairness places a high value on treating people with dignity and respect. Consequently, it is necessary and desirable to have a responsive system to engage with individuals and their families when things do go wrong.

Action 49 of the Health Strategy seeks best practice models of customer care which will include a statutory system of complaint handling, including :

- standardised customer services
- customer care plans
- statutory framework for complaints

3. Attitudes to complaints and suggestions

Handling complaints will bring benefits by :

- improving our relations with customers, patients and clients
- providing feedback on our services

In addition, complaints help us to identify problem areas which need to be put right, or mistakes we can avoid making.

The Health Service has sometimes been criticised for adopting a grudging and adversarial attitude to complaints, and for being reluctant to admit mistakes or apologise. The impression is that when a complaint is made the first reaction is often self-defence.

This may be because it is felt that complaints :

- get in the way of other work, causing delays; or
- reflect badly on performance
- are unjustified

These attitudes are not helpful. The surest way to turn a mild expression of dissatisfaction into something more serious is to deny that there is any ground for dissatisfaction, or to apologise in a grudging way. An immediate apology, or a concerned and courteous commitment to find out what has gone wrong, will often defuse the situation.

When a complaint is received it is very important that we look at it from the point of view of the complainant. We need to accept immediately that they are concerned about something, and see what we can do about it - even if all we can do is provide a clear explanation or apologise for any misunderstanding. This should be absolutely fundamental to our approach. If something has gone wrong, we need to take extra care in subsequent contacts.

Handling complaints in this way can :

- save time (which would otherwise be spent in trying to resolve the issue); and
- should be seen as something which can reflect well on performance

We therefore need to adopt a positive attitude towards complaints. Our aim should be to get everything "right first time". But, as in any organisation, things will sometimes go wrong. We must, therefore, ensure that we deal with complaints well, learn from them and where appropriate, make any necessary changes

Many providers of services - voluntary and statutory - already have established systems and experienced staff to deal with complaints.

4. Guidelines for the handling of complaints and suggestions

An enhanced complaints system will

- **have key objectives**

- ease of access for patient/clients and their families
- a simplified procedure with common features aimed at satisfying complainants' concerns
- rapid, open responses with an emphasis on early resolution
- fairness for staff and complainants alike
- learning from complaints in order to improve services and standards

- **have effective customer service**

- Quality customer service depends on a strong customer service ethos and culture. The service should be equitable, non-discriminatory and promote an integrated approach to delivery.

- **be**

- well publicised, keeping people informed of progress
- confidential - to protect staff and those who complain
- informative - providing information to management so that services can be improved
- fair - with a full procedure for investigation
- effective - dealing with all points raised and providing suitable remedies
- regularly monitored and audited to make sure that it is effective

- **be underpinned by standards**

- Complaints procedures must be well publicised, enabling service users and their families to complain about the quality or nature of service delivery.
- In recognition of the importance of responding to user concerns, complaints procedures must be properly resourced.
- All staff must be fully informed about complaints procedures.
- Standard time frames for the investigation and resolution of complaints must be implemented.
- Due regard must be given to the confidentiality of information.
- The handling of complaints must be monitored and evaluated and used to inform the development and delivery of services.

Handling complaints and suggestions

An enhanced complaints system will

- **support**

- Local resolution

Local resolution lays emphasis on complaints being dealt with quickly and where possible, by those on the spot. The intention is that the process will be fair, flexible and conciliatory, with the complainant being given the opportunity to understand all possible options for pursuing the complaint and what is involved. In practice, complaints are most likely to be made to front-line staff and management should empower staff to deal with problems directly wherever possible.

- Organisational review

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the local response the complaint will be investigated at a higher level, which may include review by the CEO/General Manager and/or complaints review committee.

- Independent review

If the complainant is still not satisfied they have the right to refer the matter to the Ombudsman for independent investigation.

- **be responsive to the complainant. The person dealing with the complainant therefore, will**

- deal sensitively with the complainant
 - deal with complaints on an individual basis
 - listen actively with an intent to understand, rather than reply
 - get the full facts (who, what, where, when, why and how)
 - where possible, deal with it as soon after the event as is practical, preferably on a face-to-face basis
 - discuss behaviours and what actually happened, rather than personalities
 - not make assumptions about what happened
 - keep an open mind
 - ask the right type of question
 - listen - not just what is said, but how it is said. Observe body language
 - make sure they have found the problem itself and not just another symptom
 - confirm their understanding of the problem
 - summarise and check for understanding
 - never try to justify or be seen to justify a staff member's alleged behaviour/attitude
 - empathise with the complainant
 - advise the complainant of his or her right to have their complaint investigated by the Ombudsman

5. Additional support in handling complaints and suggestions

Staff training

There must be appropriate training for staff dealing with complaints and suggestions. Staff training programmes could include : customer care, empathy with the complainant, the role of the complaints manager, investigation of complaints, conflict resolution, current thinking on bereavement, ethos and organisations, writing to complainants and cultural diversity.

Advocacy

Each organisation must examine the need to build the capacity of vulnerable people in order to develop their confidence, knowledge and experience so as to advocate and speak for themselves if they are dissatisfied with services. Health agencies should actively liaise with advocate and representative groups to enable the service user to access the complaints and suggestions mechanisms.

Suggestions

Suggestions and comments by individual health service users can be helpful in supporting their pathway. To establish broader service user input, organisations must undertake more comprehensive research e.g. survey of user needs.

Components of a suggestions/comments system are similar to that of a complaints system. They will comprise a set of processes across services, programmes and population groups, which have common characteristics :

- Patients, clients and their families should find it easy to use and accessible. Particular attention should be paid to disadvantaged groups and people with special needs.
- Staff should be open, continuously looking for feedback; acting when it is received.
- Ideally, suggestions should be acted upon as close to the point of care as possible.
- The processes should be simple and written in plain language (where a multi-lingual population exists this should be considered).
- The processes should recognise staff as internal customers and an invaluable source of feedback.
- Staff, in operating these processes, should be appropriately trained in customer care.
- Suggestions should be analysed and audited for patterns, changes and opportunities to improve services.
- Suggestions/comments are regarded as being linked to the ongoing development of Customer Care, Quality Improvement, Risk Management and FOI.

The positive nature of many of the comments/suggestions received should provide both an excellent opportunity to show staff that they are valued and a balance to the complaints system which, despite a blame-free, system-focussed approach, could cause anxiety and stress to staff.