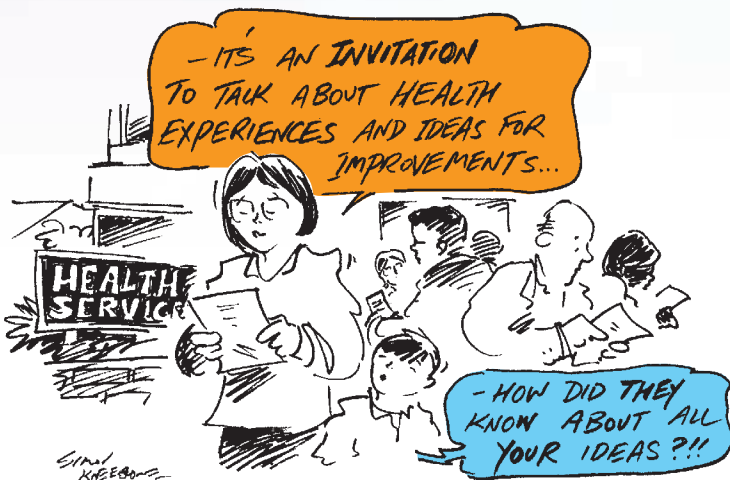


Getting Involved

A KIT FOR CONSUMERS INTERESTED IN JOINING THE CONSUMER NOMINEE PROGRAM



Acknowledgements

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GETTING INVOLVED

A KIT FOR CONSUMERS INTERESTED IN JOINING THE CONSUMER NOMINEE PROGRAM

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WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

This Kit has been written for people like yourself who want to play a part in improving Victoria's health services. It provides information to inform you about Health Issues Centre's Consumer Nominee Program and how it can help you to use your experience, wisdom, and ideas to 'make a difference' in Victoria. It includes information, advice, tips and resources to encourage you to get involved.

Health Issues Centre promotes the idea that people should be active partners in their own health care. In addition, it considers it vital that the voices of consumers, carers and community members (referred to as 'consumers' throughout the Kit) should inform all aspects of the health system.

Each year, Health Issues Centre is contacted by hospitals, community health centres, government departments and other health agencies for assistance with getting consumer input to decisions about the planning, delivery and evaluation of health services, health information and health policy. Health Issues Centre has developed the Consumer Nominee Program as a forum for finding and matching consumers with these requests, and for building the capacity of both staff and consumers to work in partnership to improve the health system.

The Program gets many requests each year, creating a wide range of opportunities for consumers to contribute to decision-making processes in health care. Most of the requests are for consumers to sit on committees, and the information and advice in this Kit is primarily focused on supporting consumers to undertake this kind of role. The range of committees is very diverse: national, state, local, metropolitan, rural and regional, and working on issues such as quality and safety, planning new projects or evaluating services, and advising on the ongoing needs of the community.

The Consumer Nominee Program also provides training for consumers to build skills in consumer participation, and opportunities to meet other consumers, as well as telephone advice and information about helpful resources.

We are also working with health providers to assist them to work more effectively with consumers, and this Kit is complementary to a health provider Kit called *Getting Started*.

The Kit also includes a feedback form and we welcome your comments about how useful this Kit has been, and your suggestions about how it could be improved.

If you have any other questions, or have any comments, please contact the Consumer Nominee Program Coordinator on (03) 9479 5827 or by email: info@healthissuescentre.org.au

We welcome you to the program and look forward to working with you to make a difference to health services in Victoria.

Tony McBride
Chief Executive Officer
Health Issues Centre

SECTION 1

“Consumer Participation” – what is it?

Consumers bring essential and unique perspectives about health care and health services to decision-making forums. Their views are grounded in their specific experiences of using health services as patients, clients or carers, and also experiences of needing or missing out on health care. Consumers have direct knowledge about what has worked and what didn't work, what is happening to people in their communities and what issues are most important for those communities. This direct consumer perspective is essential for identifying quality and safety issues, for evaluating health services and for ensuring that decisions made about the planning, design and implementation of health services take account of communities' needs.

There are a number of different ways consumers can become involved in improving the health system.

Consumers are frequently invited by their health service to provide information about a recent and direct experience of care or seeking care, for example, through requests for feedback or suggestions. Such feedback might be about whether written information was valuable, appropriate and helped them understand their condition and make decisions about care. It might be about whether they had sufficient opportunities to consult with members of the treating team about a child's chronic illness. Such information would hopefully then be used to improve the quality of the service.

However, as observant consumers will know from experience, the process of change is often not this simple, and changing health services to be more responsive to the needs of consumers is often more challenging and time consuming.

A second level of consumer participation is being involved in contributing a consumer perspective – usually by being a consumer on a committee – about the systems and structures that determine planning, policy and service delivery. In this role, services will expect a consumer member to speak not just from their own experience, but to have the skills, knowledge and aptitude to contribute a broader perspective about what the health service needs to consider if it is going to meet community expectations.

Resource

Victorian Department of Human Services (2005) *Doing it with us not for us. Participation in your health service system 2005-08: Victorian consumers, carers, and the community working together with their health services and the Department of Human Services.*

SECTION 2

About Health Issues Centre

Health Issues Centre is an independent, non-government, not-for-profit organisation whose objective is to improve the health outcomes for Australians, especially the disadvantaged. This is achieved by undertaking consumer-focussed research, policy analysis from consumers' perspectives and by providing information, training and support for both consumers and health care providers.

As part of this work, Health Issues Centre produces a journal, *Health Issues*, which includes articles for consumers and health professionals about participation in the health system. It also holds a collection of resources about consumer and community participation in its library collection and on its websites:

- ◆ www.participateinhealth.org.au
- ◆ www.healthissuescentre.org.au

About the Consumer Nominee Program

The Consumer Nominee Program aims to assist health agencies to find suitable consumers and to enable interested consumers to make a contribution on key committees. It provides a structure within which consumer participation can be encouraged, facilitated, supported and developed. Through this program you will be given opportunities to become involved in the health system, to apply to join committees and to meet with other consumers who are also interested in consumer participation and health issues.

The Consumer Nominee Program offers:

- ◆ Free advertising by health agencies of consumer participation opportunities to a large network of consumers with a wide range of knowledge, experience and skills
- ◆ Monthly electronic bulletin *eNews*
- ◆ Telephone advice and support about consumer participation
- ◆ Annual program of training for agencies and consumers
- ◆ Forums and networking opportunities for consumers and service providers

What is involved in being a consumer nominee?

Registering for the Consumer Nominee Program opens opportunities for you to become involved in a range of health programs, initiatives and committees, such as:

- ◆ Single issue community consultations such as a community forum or workshop
- ◆ Focus groups, discussion groups, one-on-one interviews for research and evaluation of health interventions
- ◆ Committees – these can be project reference groups, advisory groups, steering committees etc. The terms of reference might be mandated by legislation or set by the health service. The committee may meet only two or three times a year for three years, or every month for six months. It might be a committee comprised totally of consumers, or you might be the only consumer sitting around a table with managers, government bureaucrats and clinicians.

Increasingly, health service committees are required to have a formal structure for incorporating consumer participation. The following examples give some idea of the range and diversity of requests that Health Issues Centre receives:

- ◆ Southern Health's Ethics Committee looking for a consumer representative for the committee.
- ◆ Australian Red Cross Blood Service looking for a consumer to sit on its new advisory committee to provide information and advice for the "better safer transfusion practice program".
- ◆ Consumers living in inner city Melbourne wanted for a one-day community participation panel about the new elective surgery centre at the Alfred Hospital.
- ◆ Department of Human Services looking for consumers to join a Reference Group that would provide advice about the development of a statewide policy for consumer participation in Victorian health services.
- ◆ Department of Health and Ageing sponsoring consumers to attend a symposium about the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme in Canberra

Matching consumers with requests

Requests for consumer representatives or nominees are included in the monthly email bulletin *eNews* that is sent to members of the Consumer Nominee Program, members of Health Issues Centre and subscribers to the journal, as well as a wide range of organisations that have consumer members and self-help groups. We also contact members directly if we think that an opportunity is especially suited to their experiences and skills.

Training opportunities for consumers

Health Issues Centre runs a regular program of training workshops to develop the capacity of consumers involved in the Consumer Nominee Program. Details about forthcoming workshops are available on the website:

www.healthissuescentre.org.au

Health Issues Centre also provides tailored training workshops for staff in the health sector. For more information, please contact Health Issues Centre on (03) 9479 5827.

Information and advice

The Consumer Nominee Program Coordinator is available to discuss questions and provide advice to consumers. As mentioned above, Health Issues Centre has an extensive collection of resources that might be useful to you through its library, journal and websites.

This Kit also includes references and links to more resources (see Section 8).

SECTION 3

How to Get Involved

First, complete the Consumer Nominee Program Registration Form included in this Kit and send it back to Health Issues Centre. The Form asks for your contact details and information about your interests, your experience and what kind of issues you would most like to participate in. We also ask about any training needs you might have. The Consumer Nominee Program Coordinator will then contact you confirming that we have received your registration details. Your name will go on a database with other interested consumers. Health Issues Centre respects your privacy and our privacy policy is given below.

Once you join, you will receive monthly copies of our newsletter, *eNews*. The newsletter publicises requests for consumers to join committees, projects, attend focus groups or answer surveys. As well, the newsletter will provide you with information about conferences, workshops, seminars, new resources and training programs.

You have the choice of deciding your level of involvement. You are welcome to follow up on requests in *eNews* directly, or to contact the coordinator for more information. Alternatively, when requests come to the coordinator, you might be contacted to see if you are interested and if you have the time to participate.

Privacy

Our Policy on Privacy

When you register as a consumer nominee, we ask you for some personal details. We only collect personal information that is necessary to the function of the Consumer Nominee Program, specifically, your name, contact details, the health issues you are interested in and any particular training needs you have.

In response to you providing us with this personal information, we undertake to make sure that your privacy is protected. Therefore, the database where we store this information can only be accessed by Health Issues Centre staff responsible for responding to requests for consumers.

Your personal information will not be given to agencies unless you give us permission. When we get requests, we will publicise them through *eNews* or contact you directly.

SECTION 3

We also ensure that you can amend your registration details or withdraw your name from the database at any time. The form for updating your contact details is included in this Kit.

If you believe that your privacy has been breached by our Program, please contact the Chief Executive Officer of Health Issues Centre, who will investigate your complaint.

This policy is based on the Victorian Government's *Information Privacy Act* and the *Health Records Act (2001)*

For information about your privacy rights, the *Health Records Act*, the *Information Privacy Act* and the *Privacy Act (1988)*, contact the following:

Office of the Victorian Privacy Commissioner

Website: www.privacy.vic.gov.au

Ph: 1300 666 444

Office of the Health Services Commissioner

Website: www.health.vic.gov.au/hsc

Ph: 1800 136 066

Office of the Federal Privacy Commissioner

Website: www.privacy.gov.au

Ph: 1300 363 992

When You are Invited to Join a Committee – a Checklist for Getting Involved

There are a number of issues you need to consider carefully before you apply to join a committee or consultation process. It is important for your own sense of self-worth, and level of satisfaction in the role, that you clearly understand your own motivations as well as the needs and expectations of the health service or committee. Before you apply to get involved, ask yourself these questions:

1. Why are you interested in getting involved?
2. What do you expect to get out of it?
3. What is the committee's work? What are its Terms of Reference?
4. What are the committee's expectations of you as a consumer member?
5. What skills and experience do you have that will help you?
6. What support do you need?

SECTION 3

7. Is there any potential conflict of interest in your involvement (and does the committee have a policy on "conflict of interest" that will address this)?
8. Do the meeting arrangements suit you? Where and when are the meetings held? How long do they run? How will you get there? Is there any support for you to access the meeting place (e.g. car parking, childcare)?

Don't be put off by this list – being clearer about all of these questions will make you more effective and satisfied in your role.

Most of the requests that come to the Consumer Nominee Program are from a particular hospital or health network looking for consumers to join a committee such as a Quality and Safety Committee or a Research and Ethics Committee. Committee work is based around discussion and debate within a fairly structured framework. Committees have Terms of Reference, agendas and time constraints.

Often, there will be only one consumer position on a committee. The rest of the committee will be comprised of health professionals and hospital staff. Some consumers will find this environment stimulating and challenging. Others may feel very uncertain and feel that they are on very unfamiliar territory – this is normal and you may just need time to adjust. Consumer members can also sometimes feel disappointed that the opportunity for them to contribute seems to be very limited. So you need to go into this participation with your eyes open. Built on our experience working in the area of consumer participation in health, and understanding the challenges faced by consumers working with health agencies, Health Issues Centre offers a range of supports. These are outlined in the following section.

It is important to note that Committee work is not for everyone. After asking the questions above and thinking about it, you may think that committee work is not necessarily for you. There are other equally valuable ways of making a contribution and working for change. Joining an advocacy or self-help group may suit you better. We can help you find such a group.

In order to help you decide what kind of participation you would enjoy and be best suited to, we refer you to *The little purple book of Community Rep-ing*. It is full of stories and tips about sitting on committees as a community representative, and discusses numerous issues about consumer participation. We encourage you to read it. Copies are available at Health Issues Centre Ph: (03) 9479 5827 or email: info@healthissuescentre.org.au

SECTION 4

Support for Consumers

Our experience tells us that simply matching interested consumers with health agencies is not always adequate. Even with the best intentions, people can struggle to identify what it is the committee actually wants from them and what it is that they, as the consumer nominee, can achieve.

What Support Will I Get from the agency?

When we talk to agencies about consumer participation, we encourage them to consider individual needs and practical arrangements such as accommodating a health or disability need, orientation about the committee's aims and processes, and providing background information concerning aspects of the health sector relating to the activity. We believe it is important that health organisations make a commitment to ensuring that consumers can participate effectively.

Our position on payment for consumers

Health Issues Centre encourages organisations to recognise that consumers provide an essential and unique resource for health service planning, and that often this comes at a cost to the consumer. This may include time off work or other activities, whether paid or unpaid, or time spent preparing for meetings or talking to consumer groups in the community. We advise agencies to reimburse consumers for the costs associated with attending meetings. We also encourage agencies to consider paying consumers for their time and contribution in recognition of the time, skills, knowledge and expertise they contribute to building better health care services.

As a consumer nominee, you should be informed of, and feel comfortable about, the payment and reimbursement arrangements, prior to commencing your participation. We suggest that you let the Chairperson know if you find you are having to pay for printing, email/internet use, parking or travel. Your participation should not result in additional costs to you. The paid hospital/health network staff are required to attend and are having all their costs covered – you should not be disadvantaged simply because you are not a paid staff member! Remember that the hospital/network needs you to be on the committee and should have a budget to support your involvement. If cost becomes an issue for you, approach the Chairperson or contact Health Issues Centre to discuss this further. It may be that the health service or committee has simply not thought enough about this issue.

SECTION 4

Each consumer nominee's personal and financial circumstances will be different. Depending on the arrangements, you may need to organise with the Australian Taxation Office to have an Australian Business Number (ABN), a very simple and relatively cheap matter. Further, if you are receiving Centrelink payments, you may need to consider the impact on your benefits.

Commonwealth sitting fees, Department of Human Services sitting fees and Health Issues Centre's recommended pay scales are available on request.

What Support Will I Get from Health Issues Centre?

Health Issues Centre offers several types of support.

First, Health Issues Centre runs a regular program of training workshops for consumers. These workshops are free to consumers, and we encourage all members of the Consumer Nominee Program to attend. As well as providing you with information and skill development, the training is an important opportunity to meet other consumers.

Second, by joining the Program you will receive regular information about new resources and updates on training.

Third, you can use our websites and have free access to the Health Issues Centre library collection.

Finally, it can help to talk to someone about how you are going on a committee. The Coordinator of the Consumer Nominee Program can be contacted via the telephone, email or in person to offer information, support or advice, or we might be able to find a mentor (a consumer or sympathetic health professional) who can do the same.

Looking After Yourself

Undertaking consumer participation work can be very rewarding, providing a sense of achievement, empowerment and an opportunity to make a difference. However, changing the way decisions are made and health services are delivered can also be quite a challenging and long-term process. It is important that, when you are working to make things better for other people, you make sure you look after yourself.

SECTION 4

If you are feeling anxious or uncertain about your participation work, you can ring the Consumer Nominee Program Coordinator at Health Issues Centre to discuss how things are going. And make sure you build in time to attend Health Issues Centre's consumer training sessions, forums or conferences. Your committee or health service may even pay for you to attend relevant conferences. It is in these forums that you will find support from other people who, like you, are trying to influence change by participating as a consumer on a health service related committee.

When you are trying to do things differently, like involving consumers in health care, you may come up against people who want to keep things as they are. Sometimes, these people will have more authority, resources, information and influence than you. In this type of situation, you need to keep in mind that the agency has identified that it wants and needs your perspective and that you have been invited to take part. Sometimes it's a matter of trying different approaches in meetings or of getting more support from within the committee. Talking to the Chairperson about your frustrations can be a good start. Sometimes, it helps to talk in detail about what happens in these meetings with someone who understands what its like and can help you develop some ideas about different approaches to problem solving.

If you feel that things are not going well, that you are not making a useful contribution and that nothing you do seems to make a difference, it is important to go back to your checklist, to remind yourself of why you got involved, think about what you wanted to achieve and how long you thought it might take. It may be that what is possible has changed, or that you have achieved as much as you want or that your goals are not going to be fulfilled on this committee. Being a consumer nominee on a health organisation committee can be difficult sometimes – it is quite likely that feeling uncomfortable is NOT a bad sign! It is likely that you are, in fact, engaging well in the challenging process of creating real and sustainable change.

Remember – Health Issues Centre is able to support you and the Consumer Nominee Program Coordinator is available to discuss your concerns and help you identify strategies.

SECTION 5

What We Expect From Consumers

The consumer movement in health is part of a broader movement that is committed to the greater democratisation of society, based on the principle that the people affected by a decision have a right to participate in making that decision. Increasingly, the community expects greater involvement in decisions impacting on health and wellbeing and greater accountability and transparency from public health institutions.

Now that consumers have won “a seat at the table” at which many health care decisions are made, it is important that community expectations about how health care is delivered – about accountability, transparency, sustainability and the public interest – are also met in relation to your role as a consumer nominee.

Ethical practice in health care

Health professionals - medical practitioners, nurses and allied health workers - have a very strong ethical basis to their practice. As part of their registration as a professional, they agree to comply with a code of ethics and with standards of practice that demonstrate their regard for the dignity and autonomy of people under their care. These codes of practice are regulated by Practitioner Boards, which are responsible for holding health professionals accountable to these codes of conduct.

In accepting a role as a consumer nominee, you take on a range of responsibilities:

- ◆ **Commitment** – to attend meetings; to participate, question and contribute.
- ◆ **Confidentiality** – often, issues of a confidential nature will arise in health committee meetings. It is your responsibility to maintain confidentiality, in relation to committee matters, at all times.
- ◆ **Conflict of interest** – to declare when you have an interest, financial or personal, in a certain outcome, and that, in such circumstances, you will be prepared remove yourself from the decision-making process if asked.
- ◆ **Complaints** – that any concerns regarding the professional behaviour of staff will be directed to the relevant complaints authority within the organisation.

SECTION 6

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is a consumer?

Health Issues Centre has a broad and inclusive understanding of who is a consumer. Consumers are patients, their carers, their family, their friends; they are people living in the community who use the health service, or who will possibly use it, and people who don't feel welcome to use it. Consumers are also the citizens who want to know their taxes are providing accessible and safe health care that meets community standards of quality.

What is the difference between being a representative and being a nominee?

In our Program, we make a distinction between a nominee and a representative. As a consumer nominee, you will be asked to join a committee, to provide a perspective that reflects on a consumer's experiences, needs and expectations, about, for example, providing after-hours GP service in the community. Our program doesn't have formal processes for holding you accountable for the perspective you provide or the advice you give. This is a matter between you and the agency that selected you.

Sometimes, a particular group in the community will be asked to nominate someone to go on a committee as a representative of that group. In these cases, the consumer representative would be expected to consult regularly with that group, to represent the views of that group and to have formal processes for reporting back to that group. This is what we understand by being a representative. An example of a consumer representative would be a breast cancer support group being asked to nominate a person to represent the issues for patients living with breast cancer, in a particular region, on a hospital Research and Ethics Committee.

What do I have to offer?

Lots! Think of your role as providing a unique and indispensable resource to the committee, project etc. because of what you know about the health care system. As a consumer, carer or community member you have knowledge, understanding and a perspective about a health service or health condition that is crucial for improving the accessibility, safety and quality of the health system. It is of equal importance as the knowledge and perspective that clinicians, researchers, managers and administrators contribute.

SECTION 6

What if they don't take me seriously?

It is possible, sometimes, for busy committee members to forget that a consumer nominee is not a staff member and so does not have access to the same level of information about the health system as they do themselves. It may be, for example, that you do not have a computer at home, so you cannot receive emails or download the latest Quality and Safety Report. It may be that you begin to feel ignored in meetings, or that your contributions are being routinely dismissed, or you may find that you never get the agenda papers in time to read them. These are some examples of the ways in which you may be marginalised from the decision-making process. In the event that you, as the consumer nominee or representative, feel you are not being taken seriously, we recommend you talk to the Chair of the Committee. Together, you should try to develop some practical strategies for redressing the problem, based on the original reasons for the committee asking you to join, and your own expectations about what you wanted to achieve. If you continue to have difficulties, contact the Consumer Nominee Program Coordinator, to discuss the problem and work to develop strategies.

What if I want a break from being involved?

If you feel the committee or program you are involved with is no longer meeting your expectations, or you would like to take a break, you should speak first with the Chairperson of the committee and explain your situation. Alternatively, if you feel more comfortable, you can contact the Consumer Nominee Program Coordinator.

Dealing with feeling over-committed or deciding to take a break could be a good opportunity for you to provide Health Issues Centre with feedback about your involvement in the Program. Hearing back from consumer participants supports us in our efforts to constantly improve our work with consumers in the health care system.

SECTION 7

Consumer Rights

The concept of "rights" and having a legislated or formally ratified set of rights has developed throughout the twentieth century as part of the democratic tradition and can be found in the United Nations Charter of Human Rights, the United States of America Bill of Rights and the statements of rights developed by various international consumer organisations such as Consumers International. Here in Australia, the Consumers' Health Forum of Australia has developed a set of rights in relation to consumers and health. It is useful to think about these various assertions of human rights and to consider your own position on "rights". You may even find it useful to develop your own principles around the right to consumer participation in Health, or your own version of a Charter of Health Consumer Rights.

The following is reproduced with permission from the Consumers' Health Forum of Australia; further information about consumers and health in Australia can be accessed on their website www.chf.org.au

Charter of Health Consumer Rights

Consumer organisations worldwide use the eight consumer rights to lobby on behalf of consumers and validate the views of consumers. Consumers' Health Forum of Australia has adapted the rights to their own areas of interest.

These rights outline the basic needs of health consumers:

- ◆ **The right to satisfaction of basic needs** - food, clothing, shelter, health care and education.
- ◆ **The right to safety** - protection against products, production processes and services which are hazardous to health or life.
- ◆ **The right to be informed** - given the facts needed to make an informed choice, and protected against dishonest or misleading advertising and labelling.
- ◆ **The right to choose** - to select from a range of products and services, offered at competitive prices with an assurance of satisfactory quality.

SECTION 7

- ◆ **The right to be heard** - to have consumer interests represented in the making and execution of government policy and in the development of products and services.
- ◆ **The right to redress** - to receive a fair settlement of just claims, including compensation for misrepresentation, shoddy goods or unsatisfactory services.
- ◆ **The right to consumer education** - to acquire knowledge and skills needed to make informed, confident, choices about goods and services, while having an awareness of basic consumer rights and responsibilities.
- ◆ **The right to a healthy environment** - to live and work in an environment which is non-threatening to the well being of present and future generations.

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Consumers International

Consumers International (CI) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that represents consumer groups and agencies all over the world. It has a membership of over 250 organisations in 115 countries. Its goal is to promote a fairer society through defending the rights of all consumers through increasing the number and scope of consumer organisations and campaigning to increase the number of 'consumer friendly' policies and laws of governments.

It was established in 1960 as the International Organisation of Consumers Unions (IOCU) by national consumer organisations. The original members recognised that they could build upon their individual strengths by working across national borders. The organisation rapidly grew and soon became established as the voice of the international consumer movement on issues such as product and food standards, health and patients' rights, the environment and sustainable consumption, and the regulation of international trade and public utilities.

CI bases its work on the United Nations' list of consumer rights:

- ◆ the right to satisfaction of basic needs
- ◆ the right to safety
- ◆ the right to be informed

SECTION 7

- ◆ the right to choose
- ◆ the right to be heard
- ◆ the right to redress
- ◆ the right to consumer education
- ◆ the right to a healthy environment.

Reprinted from Wikipedia, the online free encyclopedia. Downloaded 7 September 2005.

Website of Consumers International: www.consumersinternational.org

SECTION 8

Contact Details and Resources

Health Issues Centre
Level 5, Health Sciences 2
LA TROBE UNIVERSITY VIC 3086

Phone: (03) 9479 5827
Fax: (03) 9479 5977

Email: info@healthissuescentre.org.au
Website: www.healthissuescentre.org.au

Chief Executive Officer
Tony McBride
Phone: (03) 9479 5827
Email: t.mcbride@healthissuescentre.org.au

Consumer Nominee Program Coordinator
Charmaine Farrell
Phone: (03) 9479 5827
Email: c.farrell@healthissuescentre.org.au

Contact details current as at September 2005

Resources

Website www.healthissuescentre.org.au with articles, research findings, reports, policy advice about our work in research, policy advice and practice change to build a more consumer focused health system.

Website www.participateinhealth.org.au with:

- ◆ information sheets, tools, articles, research findings and reports
- ◆ information about the Consumer Nominee Program, our training program
- ◆ back copies of our journal *Health Issues*
- ◆ the latest copy of *eNews*
- ◆ electronic versions of this kit, plus our kit for health workers *Getting Started*.

We also have an extensive collection of resources and reports available to members on site at Level 5, Health Sciences 2 Building, La Trobe University, Bundoora.

SECTION 8

Consumer Information and Participation Program – Department of Human Services

- ◆ website <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/consumer/> includes links to information about policy, resources, the Victorian Quality Council and contacts for staff working on consumer participation.

SECTION 9

The Australian Health Care System: Some Introductory Facts

Australia has a very complex health care system with many types of services, providers and funding arrangements. You may already be familiar with this, but, not surprisingly, few consumers are aware of all of the services, organisations and funding responsibilities in the Australian health system. As this might be useful to you in your new role, we have printed some very basic facts here. We also run a training session for consumer members on the Australian Health Care System, and have a range of useful books and reports in our library.

Overview

In Australia, both the public and private sectors fund and provide health care, and all levels of government are involved. Very roughly, the Commonwealth Government has responsibility for national health care funding and broad policy decisions, while the states are responsible for the delivery of services (except general practitioners (GPs)). Australia spends less on health care than the US, Canada, Germany and France but more per capita than the UK, New Zealand and Japan.

There is free access to most but not all health care in Australia. Public hospital care is free but there are at least some consumer charges for most other services. Australia's health care system is significantly funded from general taxation revenue collected by the Commonwealth Government. A modest proportion of this comes from the Medicare levy of 1.5% that is charged on individuals who are earning more than \$50,000 p.a. However, the fees which individuals pay directly to health providers (known as 'out-of-pocket expenses') make up about one-third of all money spent on the health system.

Commonwealth Level

The Commonwealth Government funds and administers the Medical Benefits Scheme (which partially pays for GP services), the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (which partially pays for medications) and the Australian Health Care Agreement (which gives funds to the states to run public hospitals). The Department of Health and Ageing is the national health agency (www.health.gov.au), and is responsible for national policy, funding public health programs, research and information management.

SECTION 9

Medicare

The Medical Benefits Scheme (Medicare) was introduced in 1975 (when it was known as Medibank) with the aim of providing universal health cover to all Australians on the basis of medical need, rather than ability to pay. However the reality is somewhat different. The Health Insurance Commission has the responsibility for administering Medicare (www.hic.gov.au).

- ◆ Medicare is available to all Australians and it covers a significant proportion of the costs of seeing all doctors, including GPs and specialists, plus diagnostic tests like pathology or eye tests. How much you pay depends on the policy of individual doctors, which in turn depend on location (rural costs are higher) and specialty (pathology tends to be free at the point of use).
- ◆ Medicare does not cover dental examinations, ambulance services, allied health services, glasses and hearing aids.
- ◆ State and territory governments supplement Medicare funding so the above services can be provided in community health services for those who cannot afford them.

Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS)

The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) subsidises approved medications to Australians: PBS listed medicines cost the consumer no more than \$23.70. About three-quarters of medications dispensed by Australian pharmacies are included on the PBS. The Scheme is regarded as one of the most effective in the world and has successfully balanced access to reliable effective medicines with controlling the continual pressures of rising costs.

State Level

State governments are primarily responsible for delivering health care services, and funding the gaps left by Medicare. For example:

- ◆ States provide funding to public hospitals (which are independently run in regional groups) and regulate them. Some of the money comes from the Commonwealth, which comes with strings attached.

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- ◆ States directly fund psychiatric hospital and community services, plus a range of community and public health services such as community health services, dental care and child health programs.
- ◆ In Victoria, the Department of Human Services is the central health agency (www.dhs.vic.gov.au). It has responsibility for mental health services, child protection, public housing, disability services, hospitals and problem gambling services.

Local Level

Local governments are responsible for some public health services and for public health surveillance but not for clinical medical services. Local governments are also involved in immunisation programs, they run maternal and child health centres and they also undertake some health promotion activities.

Health service delivery

A mix of public and private sector providers deliver health care services:

- ◆ The majority of doctors are self-employed and engaged in private practice, although they receive the bulk of their income from Medicare. There are also a growing number of private companies employing doctors and other professionals.
- ◆ Public hospitals are run as independent organisations with their own Boards, but directly funded by State governments and closely controlled by them.
- ◆ Private hospitals are owned by for-profit or not-for-profit organisations such as health insurance or religious agencies.

Private Health Insurance

Private health insurance is a significant component of the Australian health care system:

- ◆ Private health insurance can meet some of the costs of private services that are not covered by Medicare, such as attending a private hospital or seeing allied health workers, such as podiatrists or psychologists. This insurance is now heavily (and controversially) subsidised by the Commonwealth Government.
- ◆ Privately insured people also have the potential choice of doctor, hospital and timing of procedure.

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- ◆ Whether private health insurance is a valuable component of the system or not is highly contested in policy debates.

Research

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is the main funding body for health and medical research (www.health.gov.au/nhmrc) The Commonwealth Government provides funding for public health research to continually improve the evidence for public health interventions and to contribute to a reduction of future health care costs.

References

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SECTION 10

Forms

Registration Form (attached)

Feedback About This Kit (attached)



**THINKING ABOUT GETTING INVOLVED
AS A MEMBER OF THE
COMMUNITY IN THE HEALTH SYSTEM?**

THEN JOIN THE CONSUMER NOMINEE PROGRAM

Health Issues Centre is looking for people to join our Consumer Nominee Program.

Health Issues Centre gets requests from government departments, hospitals, medical boards, research bodies and health services who are looking for consumers to sit on committees or get involved with projects.

If you are interested in getting involved in the health system, or you would like to know more about training and support that is available for consumers, we would encourage you to register with the Consumer Nominee Program.

If you register, you will go on our database, and we will send you copies of *eNews*, a regular email bulletin that includes information about committee vacancies, conferences and training for consumers. This can be posted if you let us know you don't have access to email.

People involved in the Consumer Nominee Program can also subscribe to our Journal, *Health Issues*.

If you would like to register with the Consumer Nominee Program, please fill in the attached registration Form (on the back of this page) and send it back to us.

REGISTRATION FORM

Health Issues Centre is concerned to protect your privacy. We collect this information for use only by the Consumer Nominee Program. If you would like more information about the use and protection of this information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Name					
Address					
				Postcode:	
Phone		W	Phone		H
Mobile			Fax		
Email					

1. In what areas of health or the health system would you prefer to be involved?

i.e. specific conditions, or types of health service, or activity (eg quality and safety, or ethics or research etc) *(please list)*

2. Information and updates on training workshops for consumers

Topics you would like training in *(please list)*

Please return this form to:

Consumer Nominee Program
Health Issues Centre Inc.
Level 5, Health Sciences 2
LA TROBE UNIVERSITY VIC 3086

Ph: (03) 9479 5827 **Fax:** (03) 9479 5977

Email: info@healthissuescentre.org.au

Website: www.healthissuescentre.org.au

FEEDBACK FORM

for Health Issues Centre

Consumer Nominee Program **Getting Involved Kit – Consumers**

1. What was your initial reason for reading the Getting Involved Kit?

2. What did you find most useful about the Kit?

3. What could be improved?

4. How have you used the information in the kit?

5. Any other comments

Thank you for your feedback – we will use it when we update the Kit to improve its usefulness.

Please post, fax or email this form back to:

The Coordinator
Consumer Nominee Program
Health Issues Centre
Level 5, Health Sciences 2
LA TROBE UNIVERSITY VIC 3086

Fax: (03) 9479 5977

Email: info@healthissuescentre.org.au