

324: EFFECTIVE CONSUMER PARTICIPATION IN A RURAL HEALTH SERVICE

Authors:

Gibson Y.L., Lambert M.A.S.

Objectives:

The purpose of this project was to develop and implement effective and sustainable consumer participation in a rural health service providing acute, subacute, mental health, and community services.

Methods:

Internationally there is an increasing emphasis on consumer participation in health, with a growing body of evidence to support the benefits of consumer participation in individual client care and in enhancing health service quality and safety. To guide our response to this recognised need, a consumer participation task group was formed with representation of Board of Management, senior staff and consumer consultants. The task group is responsible for co-ordinating a three year strategy for consumer participation.

Methodology for the project included assessing current capacity through administration of a consumer participation awareness audit; consumer participation activity audit; and an audit of consumer information publications. These audits identified wide variation in understanding, skills and experience in undertaking consumer participation activities, gaps in the range and quality of publications, and the lack of co-ordinated processes for registering outcomes of consumer participation activities.

Planning was supported by identification of best-practice approaches and SWOT analysis. Four key areas for action were identified, including consumer participation, consumer information, consumer satisfaction, and quality reporting to the community. Strategy plans for each of these areas were developed, with implementation in year one focussing on model development, the introduction of organization-wide systems and processes, and capacity building.

A consumer participation framework has been developed. Objectives include consumer participation in decision making about care, informing service development at the program level, and informing quality and safety at an organization-wide level. Inclusion of consumers in the development of the framework, and capacity building activities to support their involvement have been essential.

Consumer information initiatives include development of guidelines for staff in producing well-written consumer information, establishment of a process for approval of publications, policy development, and establishment of an electronic publications register.

Quality reporting to the community is an initiative introduced by the Victorian State Government. Mandatory reporting criteria included credentialing, infection control, and deaths in hospital. Production of the report involved consumer participation in identification of topics and editorial input. Evaluation has been undertaken through a state-wide awards program in which our report was judged best in its category, through reader evaluation questionnaire, and focus group discussion with a local Consumer Reference Group.

Consumer satisfaction activities have focussed on implementation of the Victorian Patient Satisfaction Monitor, which is measured and reported twice a year. An action learning approach to staff skill development in the design and analysis of satisfaction surveys has been implemented.

Results:

Evaluation of the strategy is based on process changes in the first year. Results include documentation of the strategy; increased Board of Management participation; distribution of consumer information guidelines; completion of 3 staff education programs; 23 new publications developed in accordance with guidelines; establishment of an electronic publications register; completion of 3 satisfaction surveys; and a range of policies documented. Additional measures include the continuing participation of consumer consultants who describe increased knowledge, skills and confidence in undertaking their role.

Conclusions:

Success factors include champions at board and executive level, dialogue to develop a shared understanding of consumer participation, theory and practice, and establishing credibility of the project by ensuring consumer participation in each of the strategies, and thereby "practicing what we preach".

To fully implement the strategy over three years will require human and financial resources above those currently available. The time it takes to support consumer consultants and their knowledge of the organization cannot be underestimated.