

Fact Sheet

Information for consumer representatives

Guidelines for consumer representatives on conference organising committees

The Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) frequently nominates a consumer representative to the conference organising committee for national health conferences. Health consumers provide a unique and important perspective on health. They include patients and potential patients, carers and organisations representing consumers' interests. Health consumers provide government and policy makers with a consumer perspective on health issues, and balance to the views of government, health care professionals, industry, service providers and academics.

It is expected that consumer representatives who nominate for conference organising committees will advocate strongly for health consumers in all aspects of conference planning to ensure:

- the venue accommodates health consumers
- keynote consumer speakers
- opportunities are provided for consumers to chair break-out sessions
- attendance by consumers is facilitated and encouraged
- an appropriate selection process is undertaken for funded consumer places
- after the conference, reports are provided back to the representatives' consumer networks.

Venue accommodates health consumers

When developing the program for a conference, including when choosing a venue, the consumer representative must highlight and advocate strongly for the needs of consumers attending the conference as consumer representatives, or of any other delegate or speaker. Consideration of these needs will require the conference organisers to:

- schedule sessions to run for no more than 2 hours, and keep them strictly to time
- use microphones when conducting sessions in large rooms, or in rooms with background noise
- cater for special dietary needs, and ensure these are noted when attendees register for the conference, not on the first day
- provide appropriate assistance with transport, e.g. a shuttle bus from the airport to the venue may not be appropriate for some health consumers

- ensure disabled access is available to the conference venue, and to all facilities within the conference venue (e.g. to allow access to toilets etc.)
- ensure, if overnight accommodation is required, that health consumers who require disabled access are given a hotel room specially equipped to meet their needs, as well as access to personal care services if these are required.

Speakers

A suitably diverse panel of expert speakers, who will provide the various stakeholder perspectives, must be selected and invited to contribute.

A conference organising committee should ensure a keynote speaker(s) who are able to provide a relevant Australian consumer perspective. The organising body may have someone in mind from overseas. Their perspective will not be sufficient if that person is not known in Australia or has a very different consumer perspective to that of Australian health consumers.

It is not the role of the consumer representative on the conference organising committee to invite guest consumer speakers. It is appropriate to refer back to CHF for suggestions of consumer representatives working in the area who are also good at presenting.

Opportunities for consumers in break-out sessions

Break-out sessions and concurrent sessions with topics related to the main theme of the conference are an excellent opportunity to raise the profile of consumers at the conference by:

- having consumers chair the break-out sessions
- ensuring a spread of consumer presenters in these sessions
- ensuring articulate consumers are invited to attend and participate from the audience.

This may be less confronting than speaking to the whole conference.

The consumer representative should advocate for an equitable spread of consumer chairs of break-out sessions, in relation to other stakeholders attending the conference.

Attendance by consumers

A successful national health conference should include a consumer presence. Conference registrations are often expensive though, and beyond the means of health consumers and health consumer organisations. Consumer attendance at a conference can be encouraged by the organising committee, which can assist in overcoming cost issues by:

- allocating a number of fully-funded places to consumers
- meeting costs for travel, accommodation and the incidental expenses of the consumer.

Without these subsidies, there is unlikely to be a reasonable consumer presence, and the success of the conference will be diminished.

Discourage the conference organising committee from allocating a fixed sum of money to consumer places, because the cost of airfares will discriminate against some consumers on the basis of geography.

Appropriate selection of funded consumer participants

An appropriate process for selection of consumer representatives should be agreed with the organising committee.

Selection processes should be developed by and with consumers and include the input of a recognised consumer organisation. Consumer representatives should be chosen on the basis of:

- their responses to the selection criteria
- an equitable spread across gender, location, illness groups etc.

CHF is experienced with developing selection criteria and seeking expressions of interest, and will consider requests for this service for national conferences in CHF priority areas.

After the conference

Following the conference the consumer representative on the organising committee should provide a report to CHF for its records and for publication in its monthly newsletter, *HealthUpdate*. Consumers attending on funded places should also be encouraged to report back to their consumer networks, which will also give the body which organised the conference an opportunity to promote itself to a wider audience.