



Managing complaints against dietitians.

Receiving a complaint is an unexpected part of running any business. No business is immune from receiving a complaint, regardless of how successful it is or how customer focused staff are. There can be a tendency to see a complaint as a personal criticism rather than constructive feedback. However, there can be positive outcomes when the situation is managed appropriately.

Why do people complain?

There are many reasons why clients might complain about your practice and the service they've received. Sometimes a complaint will almost be expected following an incident; sometimes it will take you by complete surprise. Understanding why people might complain can assist with managing a complaint if it occurs and potentially reducing the likelihood of further complaints.

The following are some of the reasons why people may feel the need to complain.

High expectations – consumer expectations are increasingly high when engaging professional services. Your clients pay for your service and will see you as a highly trained and qualified health professional. This view can influence their expectations about the service and outcomes they anticipate.

Unrealistic expectations – it's possible that clients may have unrealistic expectations about what they can reasonably expect from the services you provide. Their high expectations may at times surprise you. It's therefore important to remember that most clients will not have the clinical knowledge you do and what's obvious or common sense to you may not be to them. A dietitian must assist clients to be clear and fully informed about the services being provided and the outcomes they can realistically expect. This requires ongoing discussions with clients and, where possible, written information to assist their understanding.

To inform and be heard – clients may wish to make a complaint about an incident or poor outcome so they're sure you and your staff are aware of what's occurred and how they feel. They may wish to complain just to be listened to and acknowledged, especially if they've been adversely impacted. Not all complaints will lead to a formal demand for compensation.

Belief that someone is responsible – when something goes wrong, we often try to determine who's responsible. Sometimes someone is obviously responsible, sometimes it's hard to determine who's responsible and other times there's no one person responsible but just an unfortunate set of circumstances. However, if a client thought something had gone wrong and this led to them being harmed, it's quite possible they may complain with the intention of holding someone responsible and possibly liable.

The importance of managing complaints

There may sometimes be a temptation to ignore a complaint and hope it'll just go away. Maybe the client won't follow up. Maybe the incident won't occur again. This isn't an advisable way to run any business as there are clear benefits to appropriately managing complaints.

Clients will generally expect to see their complaint dealt with quickly and fairly. When this doesn't happen it's possible that further complaints will follow, and the issue or concern could become a much greater one. Complaints may also escalate to a regulatory body.

Managing complaints should be seen as good 'customer service'. You rely on clients to keep your business afloat. When clients are unhappy with a service they've received, they can talk with their feet by not returning to the practice. Keeping clients happy and satisfied is more likely to see them continue to utilise your service and recommend your practice to others.

Complaints can provide a practice with an opportunity to review and improve

their service. Receiving a complaint may highlight an issue which the practice had not been aware of. When investigating and dealing with the complaint, the practice may wish to consider a change in procedure or process to avoid that issue arising again in the future.

How to manage complaints

It's advisable that every practice has a complaints policy. This means that the practice will have an agreed-to process for dealing with a complaint which allows for all complaints to be managed in a fair and consistent manner. It also means staff know what to do which is important as managing complaints can be quite challenging.

A key aspect in dealing with any complaint is listening to the person. Where possible, make time to sit down in a quiet space and give them time to express their concerns. Make the effort to hear what they have to say and take on board what they've told you. You may not agree with all they're saying, however it helps if you can try to understand the situation from their perspective. You may wish to ask

them to document their concerns so you both have an accurate record of the matter. Avoid being defensive or taking the complaint personally as this may inflame the situation.

With low level complaints you may be able to offer a solution there and then. However, this won't always be the case. With more serious complaints you should provide the person with an assurance that you'll investigate the matter and get back to them later with a response.

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