MonashHealth

Clinicians, Consumers, Evidence
Centre for Clinical Effectiveness

Literature Review

Best practice in written response to complaints

Citation Garrubba M, Yap G, Melder A. 2015. Best practice in written responses to complaints made in the healthcare setting: A literature review. Centre for Clinical Effectiveness, Monash Innovation and Quality, Monash Health, Melbourne, Australia.

Executive Summary

Background

In order to inform an audit of written response to complaints at Monash Health a review of best practice about how to respond to complaints was conducted.

Question

What is best practice for written responses to complaints made in the healthcare setting?

Methods

A Google search was undertaken using key search terms around writing a response letter to a complaint in the healthcare setting.

Results

Thirteen resources provided items for inclusion in a written response to a complaint. A best practice map of these items was compiled.

Using this best practice map the most commonly cited items to be included in a written response to a complaint are listed in Table 1. These items were then mapped to the items drafted for the Monash Health audit in Table 1. From the mapping exercise there are items that are not currently included in the Monash Health draft audit and extra items included in the Monash Health draft audit are also included in Table 1.

While the most commonly cited items are included in Table 1, a full list of best practice items to include when providing a written response to a complaint are listed in Table 2, best practice map for written responses to a complaint.

Table 1. Key items of best practice in written response to complaints

Best practice items in written response to complaints (most common items only)	Items included in Monash Health's Draft Audit Plan
The Complaint: Apologise where appropriate	✓ Has an apology been offered
The issue Acknowledge the distress and the persons experience (empathy)	✓ Letter has addressed all of the issues raised by the complainant
Analysis of the issues • Provide an explanation of how and why the problem happened. Taking the time to explain to a customer what might have caused the problem helps organisations re-establish trust and regain customer goodwill.	**X** (Not included)

• Discuss what has been done to investigate the complaint • All issues raised should be addressed as well as any other issues identified in the analysis • A clear description of how a conclusion was reached based on the analysis of each issue • Provision of key information • Discussion about what has been done to investigate the complaint	
Action arising from the complaint Mention any changes or action taken or that are being considered as a result of the complaint	**X**
Discussion Offer an opportunity to discuss further, with the choice of options (meeting, telephone, written) providing appropriate contact details	**X**
Conclusion The overall conclusion will state whether the issues have been substantiated and a summary of any factors that may affect the recommendations made	✓ Overall impression – satisfaction that all concerns raised have been responded to appropriately.
Recommendations Advise complainants that they can request an Independent Review of their concerns by the Health Service Ombudsman if they remain dissatisfied following further attempts at local resolution	**X**
Tone/Language/Style Ensure letter is written in plain English and is free of clinical or other technical terminology	✓ • The response letter is clearly articulated using plain language that the patient that can be easily understood by a patient and flows well, that is, is presented in logical order. • The response letter is clearly articulated using plain language that the patient that can be easily understood by a patient and flows well, that is, is presented in logical order.
Adopts a polite and conciliatory tone	✓ Tone of response letter is appropriate, that is, compassionate, empathetic, respectful, sincere, professional.
Additional draft audit items included by Monash Health not commonly cited in the literature	
Not commonly cited in the literature	✓ Visual presentation suitable
Not commonly cited in the literature	✓ Letter Signed off by person with relevant authority

Implications for practice at Monash Health

In order to undertake an audit of written response letters to complaints Monash Health has drafted an audit to assist with monitoring and improving the quality of their responses. To align this audit with best practice a search of the grey literature identified a number of items to be included in a written response to a complaint, some of which Monash Health have already included in their draft audit. Additional items listed below from this review are not currently included and could be considered for inclusion in the Monash Health audit.

Analysis of the issues:

- Provide an explanation of how and why the problem happened. Taking the time to explain to a customer what might have caused the problem helps organisations re-establish trust and regain customer goodwill.
- Discuss what has been done to investigate the complaint.
- All issues raised should be addressed as well as any other issues identified in the analysis.
- A clear description of how a conclusion was reached based on the analysis of each issue
- Provision of key information.
- Discussion about what has been done to investigate the complaint.

Action arising from the complaint:

Mention any changes or action taken or that are being considered as a result of the complaint.

Discussion:

Offer an opportunity to discuss further, with the choice of options (meeting, telephone, written) providing appropriate contact details.

Recommendations:

Advise complainants that they can request an Independent Review of their concerns by the Health Service Ombudsman if they remain dissatisfied following further attempts at local resolution.

Full Review

Background

The purpose of this review is to identify best practice in written responses to complaints made in the healthcare setting. The identified items will assist in monitoring and improving the quality of written responses to complaints at Monash Health.

Question

What is best practice for written responses to complaints made in the healthcare setting?

Methods

Search strategy

A Google search was undertaken using key search terms around writing a response to a complaint in the healthcare setting.

Search terms used

- Google: "how to write a professional response to a complaint letter in healthcare"

  "writing a response to a complaint letter healthcare"

Results

The search for best practice for witten responses to a complaint in the healthcare setting identified thirteen relevant resources[1-13]. These resources varied in both the number of items they set out and the detail provided.

Table 1 presents the items identified in the grey literature and a comparison of the items across resources. The NSW Government[2] presented a structure for written responses which we have adopted to categorise items. These include:

- The complaint
- The issue
- Information obtained
- Analysis of issues
- Action arising from the complaint
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Recommendations

The most common items identified covered:

Best practice items in written response to complaints (most common items only)	
The Complaint Apologise where appropriate	**Action arising from the complaint** Mention any changes or action taken or that are being considered as a result of the complaint
The issue Acknowledge the distress and the persons experience (empathy)	**Discussion** Offer an opportunity to discuss further, with the choice of options (meeting, telephone, written) providing appropriate contact details

Analysis of the issues	Conclusion
• Provide an explanation of how and why the problem happened. Taking the time to explain to a customer what might have caused the problem helps organisations re-establish trust and regain customer goodwill. • Discuss what has been done to investigate the complaint • All issues raised should be addressed as well as any other issues identified in the analysis • A clear description of how a conclusion was reached based on the analysis of each issue • Provision of key information • Discussion about what has been done to investigate the complaint	The overall conclusion will state whether the issues have been substantiated and a summary of any factors that may affect the recommendations made **Recommendations** Advise complainants that they can request an Independent Review of their concerns by the Health Service Ombudsman if they remain dissatisfied following further attempts at local resolution

Information relevant to the tone, language, style and timing of the written response was also collected. It was generally agreed that written responses to a complaint should adopt a polite and conciliatory tone, be written in plain English free from technical or clinical terminology and not use any abbreviations or acronyms unless they are explained on the first occasion of their use. Some resources suggested that a response be provided "immediately" with no time frame indicated and one provided multiple sugesstions where the complaint be acknowledged within two to three business days and resolved within ten business days[8].

Table 2. Best Practice Map For Written Responses To A Complaint

Best practice items for written responses to a complaint	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
The Complaint													
Acknowledge that the voicing of concerns is appreciated	✓			✓					✓			✓	✓
Provide a concise summary of the complaint, any background information or patient history that provides a context for the complaint, and any relevant health outcomes		✓			✓	✓	✓				✓		
Apologise where appropriate			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
The issue													
Acknowledge the distress and the persons experience (empathy)	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓				
All issues raised should be addressed as well as any other issues identified in the analysis		✓			✓					✓	✓		
The manner in which each issue was dealt with should be described, eg investigated, resolved directly, not warranting further inquiry or being referred elsewhere if they fell outside the health service's jurisdiction		✓								✓	✓		
Information obtained													
It is not necessary to list all documents obtained, unless appropriate. A summary of information however adds clarity to the response		✓							✓		✓		

Best practice items for written responses to a complaint	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Analysis of the issues													
Advise who has investigated the issues giving name and position					✓					✓			
Provide an explanation of how and why the problem happened. Taking the time to explain to a customer what might have caused the problem helps organisations re-establish trust and regain customer goodwill.			✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Say what has been done to investigate the complaint	✓			✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		
All key information should be contained in this section. If there are varying versions of events, these should be stated. If there is any corroborating evidence to support any of the versions, these should be stated. If the conflicting information cannot be resolved, the reason should be stated. Where evidence has been taken from reports or other documents, the status of the author should be noted.		✓					✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
It should be clear how a conclusion was reached, based on the analysis for each issue.		✓				✓			✓		✓	✓	✓
Action arising from the complaint													
Mention any changes or action taken or that are being considered as a result of the complaint	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Discussion													
Offer an opportunity to discuss further, with the choice of options (meeting, telephone, written) providing appropriate contact details	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Reassure the person that they can receive further service, if needed, without any concern about having made a complaint	✓		✓										
If there are numerous complex factors which need to be considered it is important to note these in order to account for the conclusions drawn. Mitigating circumstances, a demonstrated positive improvement in quality of the service arising because of the inquiry, are factors to be taken into account in making recommendations.		✓											
Conclusion													
The overall conclusion will state whether the issues have been substantiated and a summary of any factors that may affect the recommendations made		✓	✓					✓			✓		
Finish your statement with something positive									✓				
Recommendations													
Drawing on from the conclusion, this section will state clearly what the investigator recommends.		✓											
Advise complainants that they can request an Independent Review of their concerns by the Health Service Ombudsman if they remain dissatisfied following further attempts at Local Resolution					✓		✓			✓		✓	✓
Tone/Language/Style													
Adopts a polite and conciliatory tone												✓	

Best practice items for written responses to a complaint	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Write in the first person													✓
Ensure letter is written in plain English and is free of clinical or other technical terminology					✓	✓				✓	✓		
Not use any abbreviations or shortened words such as 'eg', 'it's' or 'admin'.					✓						✓		
Not use an acronym unless it is explained on the first occasion of its use					✓			✓			✓		
Ideally, not use bullet points, numbered points or titles. The letter should be personal and not read like a report. The exception to this rule is if the complainant has used this style and it would be beneficial to respond likewise.					✓								
CE sign off						✓							
Timeframe – Respond immediately, Acknowledge within 2-3 business days resolved within 10.							✓	✓		✓			

Conclusion: Implications for Monash Health

In order to undertake an audit of written response letters to complaints Monash Health has drafted an audit to assist with monitoring and improving the quality of their responses. To align this audit with best practice a search of the grey literature identified a number of items to be included in a written response to a complaint, some of which Monash Health have already included in their draft audit. Additional items listed below from this review are not currently included and could be considered for inclusion in the Monash Health audit.

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- Provision of key information
- Discussion about what has been done to investigate the complaint

Action arising from the complaint:

Mention any changes or action taken or that are being considered as a result of the complaint

Discussion:

Offer an opportunity to discuss further, with the choice of options (meeting, telephone, written) providing appropriate contact details

Recommendations:

Advise complainants that they can request an Independent Review of their concerns by the Health Service Ombudsman if they remain dissatisfied following further attempts at local resolution

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