

Complaint Handling in the Health Sector - Seminar 21 June 2017: Summary

The main focuses of this seminar were learning from one another, mechanisms for sharing best practice and the benefits of using networks to improve co-operation, collaboration and learning.

This summary does not set out to be a definitive statement of the views of the Ombudsman or any attendee, but rather to highlight the key themes and conclusions that emerged from the day's discussions. The attached document contains all the suggestions that arose from the workshops.

Structures and responsibilities

There is huge variation in complaint handling structures and governance arrangements across NHS bodies in Wales who deal with concerns under PTR, making it difficult to apply learning across organisations. Governance arrangements for dealing with complaints should be more uniform across Wales.

Similarly, there is variation in the mechanisms for progressing concerns within organisations. Some organisations give greater flexibility to staff who deal with concerns, whilst others are tied in to a more formal and procedural process of escalation. For greater learning and sharing of good practice to take place operationally across organisations, there needs to be greater consistency in how the complainant's journey is managed.

Ownership and Culture

There was considerable discussion about who "owned" a complaint. Responsibility for a complaint can be with complaint handling staff or clinicians. Whilst appreciating the difficulty clinical staff face in having to deal with complaints, because of their on-going patient care responsibilities, it was generally felt that encouraging greater clinician involvement in investigations and responses was positive. This would help develop collective responsibility, amongst complaint handling staff and clinicians, for dealing with complaints.

Whilst responsibility for a timely response to a complaint often lies with complaint handling staff, much of a complaint's progression depends on factors outside their control. A culture of collective responsibility would improve performance.

Learning and networks

The Welsh Government has conducted a review of complaints processes but the outcome of this review has not been shared. This would be a useful starting point for organisations to improve. Current processes do not assist in driving learning, both within and across organisations, because of differences in structures and governance arrangements. The establishing of complaint networks would provide benefits in terms of learning and sharing knowledge and best practice. An open, face to face discussion forum would enable greater

transparency and allow organisations to agree “what good looks like”. It could also, for example, involve sharing cases studies and stimulate debate about differences in practice.

For these networks to achieve maximum benefit there would need to be clear terms of reference and purpose, as well as protected time for individuals to attend. Individual networks must also not be allowed to operate in silos and a mechanism must be put in place for networks to link in with each other.

Putting Things Right – time for a review

While the PTR process does works, the consensus is that it is time for a review. It was understood that this was something the Listening and Learning Group and the Welsh Government were looking at. Some of the suggestions for improving PTR included:

- a greater emphasis on integration of responses
- a greater emphasis on the involvement of clinical staff and them taking more responsibility for dealing with complaints
- focusing on improving the way in which the process is managed instead of monitoring / auditing what has been done
- addressing the excessive reliance on process and system and focusing more on the complaint handling activities themselves
- ensuring greater consistency in recording of complaints data and sharing data so that true comparisons can be made.
- using this reliable information to drive improvement and change.

It was considered that the “Once for Wales” project, which will help secure consistent data recording, would assist in the identification of themes and trends, and in the sharing of lessons learned, across NHS organisations in Wales.

Next steps

One of the main drivers for this seminar was the need to find better ways of sharing best practice between and within Welsh NHS organisations. Jonathan Webb talked about the complaints journey and the need to share best practice, while Alison Bradley spoke about the learning networks for improving complaint handling that have been developed in Scotland.

There was clear support for the development and operation of a structured, network-based approach to improving complaints handling across the NHS in Wales.

Whilst these networks need to be owned and driven by health boards and trusts, the Ombudsman and his team would be happy to provide support and input where this would be helpful.

It is envisaged that many of the suggestions raised during the day will serve as a launch pad for the future activities of these networks. Jonathan Webb and his team have agreed to facilitate and develop these networks.