

Submission

No 2

**INQUIRY INTO HEALTH CARE COMPLAINTS AND COMPLAINTS
HANDLING IN NSW**

Organisation: Country Women's Association of NSW

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With over 400 members replying to our internal survey it was a general consensus that:

(1) the system for making complaints needs be streamlined and made easier for the general public,
and

(2) there must be a greater increase in funding and staffing levels to cope with what could be considered a public cry for help.

COUNTRY WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES



**SUBMISSION:
INQUIRY INTO HEALTH CARE
COMPLAINTS AND HANDLING 2011**

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The Country Women's Association of NSW thanks the Parliament of NSW Committee on the Health Care Complaints Commission for this opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into Health Care Complaints.

The CWA of NSW sent out to members a survey on this but; it was a state wide survey and not regionalised, so the answers received could not be used to compare city and country consumers, - para (a), so this submission will answer para (b).

The CWA survey showed that 23.24 per cent of the survey respondents knew of and understood the complaint handling system; only 9.54 per cent had used the complaint system; 6.27 per cent were satisfied with the information and ease of its use; and only 5 per cent were satisfied with the outcome of their complaints.

This committee was surprised at the small percentage aware of the complaints system but, then again, no-one would wonder or make enquiries about obtaining a prosthetic limb until an adverse event forced that person to do so.

Every hospital and health facility in NSW has a complaint handling policy with pamphlets in every foyer with contact details for the Health Care Complaints Commission. That would cover some of the avenues for complaint, but a recent report showed that the five health professions most commonly complained about were medical practitioners, nurses and midwives, psychologists and pharmacists.

The CWA survey indicated that there should be a better system devised to alert the public of their right to complain and the system made easier. Most can "Google" to find that "A complaint must be lodged in writing as required by the Act - can be lodged on line, or a complaint form downloaded, or letter written to the Commission via mail, email or fax - and for assistance in writing the complaint contact the Commission's Inquiry Services on a toll free number." However, not everyone can do this, and it is thought that everyone (whether I.T. literate or not should be able to easily avail themselves of this information.

The handling of complaints drew the most criticism. In 2008 the CWA entered a submission into the Inquiry of the Health Care Complaints Act 1993. We stressed the limited powers of the Committee on the Health Care Complaints Commission (a really toothless tiger); the Committee could not request that particular complaints/decisions/ findings be re-investigated; had no power to act, could not enforce follow-up and there was no infrastructure to police and enforce outcomes. Another distressing factor was the (sent into exile) isolation enforced on complainants (nurses etc.), and the excessively complex paperwork and litigation forced on to these complainants. Also the fact that the public would be much happier if the Complaints Commission included members of the public, and not just medical professionals and

bureaucrats who naturally have a tendency to protect their colleagues and peers.

Apparently, no progress has been made since 2008. Media reports in December 2011 revealed that the body tasked with investigating complaints against doctors and medical professionals is so short of funding it has been forced to cut the quality and number of its investigations. In addition an increasing number of complaints had not been met with corresponding increases in staff and funding, forcing the commission to increasingly dismiss complaints without calling complainants to clarify the problem, and the proportion of complaints about health organisations assessed for formal investigations decreased. In the 2010-2011 financial year, complaints had increased 16.8 per cent and the commission received a record 10,919 inquiries.

Urgent action must be taken to remedy this situation. The committee must register, acknowledge, and investigate every complaint (it might seem trivial to the committee, but not so to the complainant), always keeping the complainant aware of the actions being taken. Quite often, impatient and desperate people are forced to go to the media for help to air their complaints.

Also greatly increased funding and higher staffing levels are needed to cope with this influx of complaint inquiries.

Therefore, it is recommended that:-

- (1) the system for making complaints be streamlined and made easier for the general public, and
- (2) there must be a great increase in funding and staffing levels to cope with what could be considered a public cry for help.

Social Issues Committee
Country Women's Association of NSW.