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Making and resolving complaints

As carers you may find yourself in a situation where you, and/or the person you care for, believe the service a health or disability service is providing is not adequate. For example, you may have arranged for the person you care for to go into respite care. Once there you find the facility does not really understand Parkinson's and the importance of getting the right medication at the right time. Despite a couple of reminders, they are still not getting their medication in a timely fashion. Another scenario may be that you have arranged for home help from a home support agency. You are happy with the plan you, the person with Parkinson's and the team leader have agreed on, but the home help is not sticking to it. Should you make a complaint?

Absolutely! Everyone using a health or disability service has the right to make a complaint if they are not happy with the service they are receiving. This is a Right under the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights. Making a complaint is also an important way of improving the quality of services. Providers can't improve if they don't know what they are doing wrong so most want to know when things aren't quite right.

How to make a complaint

In the first instance it is usually best to make a complaint to the person or people you are complaining about, or their manager. If you have already tried this without success, or you think the problem is one the organisation as a whole needs to deal with, the next step is to contact the person in the organisation responsible for receiving complaints. All providers (including Parkinson's New Zealand) are required to have a complaints procedure and a person responsible for it. Larger providers will usually have a brochure or information on their website detailing this. If yours doesn't, call them and ask for this information. They are required to let you know about it.

You may make a complaint in any form appropriate to you (by phone, letter or at a meeting), but make sure you request a written response and outline what you expect from the provider. For example do you want an apology and an explanation or do you want to know what policy or procedures they will be putting in place to stop it happening again (or both). Also, make sure that you agree a timeframe for receiving a response. This may be part of the organisation's procedures (10 working days is usual) but it does no harm to remind them when you expect to hear back. In general the more details you can include in your complaint the better. If possible, keep a note of when things happened and any conversations you had about them.

This may seem a bit daunting but there are people available to help you through the process. Your Parkinson's Field Officer has experience in this area and can give you information and support. The Health and Disability Commissioner (HDC) also provides a free Nationwide Health & Disability Advocacy Service. Advocates are independent and on the side of the consumer. They can explain your options and support and assist you in the actions you choose to take. Complaints are usually dealt with more quickly through advocacy, so they may be particularly helpful if your provider is being slow to respond. However neither your Parkinson's Field Officer or Advocate can make the complaint for you, it has to come from you.

If you are unhappy with the response you receive, you can make a complaint directly to the Health and Disability Commissioner. The Commissioner will assess the complaint and decide the most appropriate way to resolve it. This may include referring matters to other agencies (e.g. Ministry of Health) or starting a formal investigation. This is only required in a very small number of cases. Most complaints should be resolved well before they reach this point.

Getting more information

A Guide for Carers, a useful resource produced by the Ministry of Social Development and available from Carers NZ includes a useful section on complaints. See their website www.carers.net.nz or call 0800 777 797 to request a copy.

The Health and Disability Commissioner produces a number of resources to inform you about and assist you with the complaints procedure. Look for their pamphlet, *Learning from Complaints*. Their website www.hdc.org.nz also contains a wealth of information and has a link to the Health & Disability Advocacy Service. You can contact the Service on 0800 555 050.

Right 10 – You have the right to complain and have your complaint taken seriously

- You may make a complaint in any form appropriate to you.
- You should be advised of your provider's complaints and appeals procedure.
- You should be kept informed about the progress and outcome of your complaint.
- You should be advised of the availability of advocates and the Health and Disability Commissioner to assist with your complaint.
- You should not be adversely affected as a result of making a complaint.

Taken from the Health & Disability Commission's Code of Rights