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Practice Governance and Management - QI, Incident, and Complaint Resolution Process

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) Standards for General Practice 5th Edition states:

C 3.1D: Our practice has a complaints resolution process.

C 3.2E: Our practice has at least one team member who coordinates the resolution of complaints.

Purpose

The Know You Co (TKYC) recognises the importance of appropriate responses to staff and non-staff incidences, complaints, and quality improvement (QI) proposals. Appropriate handling of these events plays vital roles in ensuring ongoing trust between affected parties, and prevents minor grievances from escalating into major incidences.

From a patient perspective, the most commonly sought-after outcomes from a health-care complaint are an explanation, an apology, reassurance and sympathy, and information as to how the relevant parties will prevent the same outcome from occurring again.

In regards to staff, it is paramount that they feel validated when raising concerns, grievances, or QI initiatives, having trust that management will respond fairly and commit to workplace improvement.

This policy and procedure is based on recommendations provided by the Commonwealth's Ombudsman's *Better Practice Complaint Handling guide*. An electronic copy of this guide is available for reference in the P:Drive. Where complaints, incidences, or QI proposals pertain to patient privacy, RACGP's *Managing Notifiable Data Breaches in General Practice* will also be consulted (copy in P:Drive).

Scope

This policy applies to all staff of The Know You Co (TKYC).

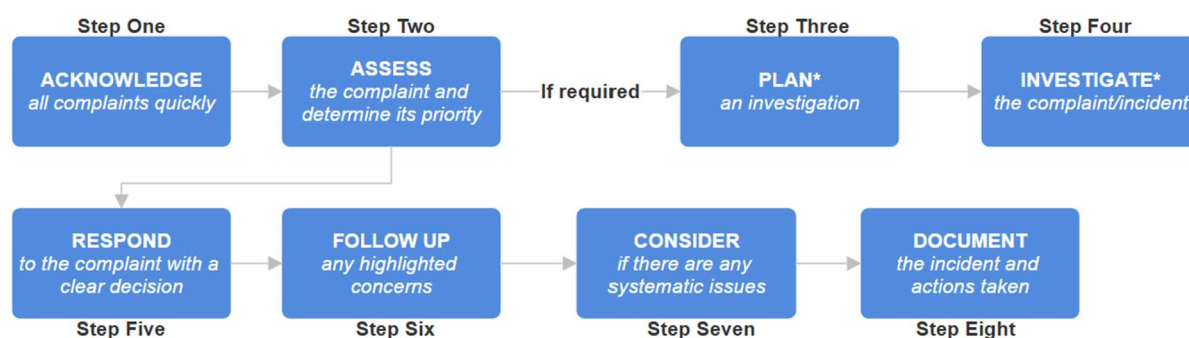
Policy

It is crucial for incident and complaint handling to possess five fundamental principles – fairness, accessibility, responsiveness, efficiency, and integration. This ensures that complaints and incidences are dealt with efficiently and effectively, and that staff, patients and/or other third parties continue to have confidence in the Practice's complaint system.

Figure 1 below shows the Eight-Steps from the *Better Practice Complaint Handling Guide* that are employed by TKYC to ensure an effective complaint handling process. At times, Steps 3 and 4 may be unnecessary, in instances where the complaint/incident are non-complex. When required, regular

contact with the complainant is maintained throughout the process so that they continue to be informed.

Figure 1: Complaint/Incident Resolution Process



Procedure

Step 1: Acknowledge

All complaints should be acknowledged quickly to reassure the individual that their complaint is receiving attention and that their concern is valid. The acknowledgement should outline the complaint process and provide contact information for the TKYC team member handling the complaint. As far as is possible and/or reasonable, the individual should be informed as to how long it is likely to take to resolve their complaint and when they will next be contacted.

It is best to acknowledge the complaint in writing but is not always necessary. Verbal information may be provided in lieu of written acknowledgement, but staff are strongly encouraged to follow-up any verbal conversations with a written acknowledgement. In instances where Management is dealing with a staff complaint, an email must be sent to the staff member with the aforementioned information. If a complaint is received by letter and can be resolved quickly, the complaint can be acknowledged at the same time as advice on the outcome of the complaint is provided.

Appendix 1 provides a template to use in this instance, noting that this may have to be adjusted depending on the circumstance.

Where non-complaint and non-incident feedback is provided by patients, information pertaining to how the practice responded to their feedback may be more appropriately conveyed via a Practice SMS update, or Practice newsletter, or in a notice in the Practice waiting room.

The handling staff member should complete a Complaint Form and/or Grievance Form, stored on the P:Drive. This is kept for Practice records. The complaint/incident should be logged in the Master Log.

Step 2: Assessment and Priority Assignment

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The Know you Co acknowledges that the natures of complaints differ widely. The subject of a complaint may be apparent from the provided information, or an investigation may be required to gather further information.

Where the complaint cannot be rectified on the spot, early assessment of the complaint is essential for effective complaint handling. This assessment should be carried out by the Practice Manager(s). In their absence, this should be carried out by the Practice Director. This is important to reduce the risks that the complaint escalates into a major incident if left for an extended period of time.

At the time of complaint acknowledgement, the complainant must be asked how they would like the complaint to be resolved – i.e, the outcome that they are seeking. This is important as it allows the response provided to the complainant in Step Five to meet the expectation of the complainant. When the complainant seeks an outcome that is inappropriate or disproportionate, the investigating staff member must explain why the request cannot be met, and if possible, offer an alternative solution.

Step Three: Planning

If the complaint is not straightforward and cannot be resolved on first contact, an investigation may be required. A short, written plan should be prepared, outlining:

- What is to be investigated
- Listing the steps involved in investigating the complaint and stating whether further information is required, either from the complainant or other parties.
- An estimated time it will take to resolve the complaint.
- Identifying the remedy the complainant is seeking, whether these expectations are realistic or will need to be managed, and other possible solutions.
- Any special considerations that apply to the complainant – anonymity, staff EAPs.

Documenting this process allows focused attention to be drawn to the complaint and ensure that aspects will not be overlooked. This is especially important if the investigation cannot be completed by the original staff member to whom the complaint was initially assigned.

Step Four: Investigation

The purpose of an investigation is to resolve the complaint by reaching a fair and independent view on the issue, and to provide an appropriate solution. Three principles must be upheld:

- 1) **Impartiality:** Each complaint should be approached with an open-mind, and the facts must be considered objectively.
- 2) **Confidentiality:** A complaint should be investigated in private, and care should be taken not to disclose information to staff that are not privy to the resolution process.
- 3) **Transparency:** A complainant should be told about the steps in the complaint process and be given an opportunity to comment on adverse information before a complaint is dismissed.

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These principles are taken from the requirements of administrative law, which all agencies must observe during complaint investigation. Additional requirements that are relevant are:

- All findings on disputed factual matters must be based on evidence that is relevant and logically capable of supporting the finding – not on guesswork, preconceived notions, suspicions, or questionable assumptions.
- A written record should be kept of evidence that is provided orally.
- A complainant is not obliged to substantiate each fact or element of their complaint, although it is reasonable for the investigator to ask them to assist the investigation by providing information and or explanations.
- The rules of evidence that apply in court proceedings do not apply to administrative investigations, and an investigator can use reliable information obtained from any source.
- To accord natural justice, a complainant should be given an opportunity to comment on contrary information or claims from another source before a decision is made to dismiss the complaint.

It is not always possible to resolve every disputed matter. Thought should be given to resolving complaints in nuanced ways, exploring the options for settlement or understanding between the complainant and those being complained about.

Step Five: Response

Once the investigation is completed, the complainant should be informed of the particulars of the investigation, including any findings and/or the decision reached. An oral explanation will usually be efficient and will be expected if that is the method of communication preferred by the complainant or adopted in earlier dealings. However, written explanation is more suitable for serious, complex, or disputes matters. It may be appropriate to telephone the complainant to inform them that a detailed written explanation will be provided to them shortly.

The explanation must be presented in a style and language that the complainant can understand, and address each concern or grievance raised in the complaint. Thought is required to be given whether a solution can be provided to the complainant. Such solutions include an apology, changing or reconsidering a decision, expediting action, removing a penalty/debt, or providing financial compensation.

The handling staff member is required to provide information to the complainant about how to further escalate their complaint if they are unsatisfied with their outcome.

Staff Complaints	Non-Staff Complaints
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fair Work Commission• Australian Government – Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Health Services Commissioner• Office of Health Services Commissioner

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<ul style="list-style-type: none">• WorkSafe ACT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• National Health Practitioner Ombudsman• Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
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Appendix 2 provides a template for this written correspondence, which should be adjusted to suit the situation.

Step Six: Follow-up

It is good practice to offer complainants the opportunity to review how the complaint was handled and resolved. Complainants are offered this opportunity in Step 5.

Step Seven: Consider Systematic Issues

The complaint may point to a systemic problem in the Practice. This possibly should always be considered when finalising a complaint. In such instances where a systemic issues is uncovered, a review of Practice procedures and policies should be undertaken, completing adjustments where necessary.

Where Complaints are in Breach of Privacy Laws

The Know You Co must comply with Australian Privacy Principles (APPs). Alleged breaches of the APPs can be investigated by the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC). If the complainant raises an issue that relates to their personal privacy, the Commissioner advises the complainant to lodge the complaint with the Practice directly. The Practice has 30 days to follow the abovementioned steps and provide a response. If the complainant is unhappy with the resolution, they may lodge the request with the OAIC.

Policy Compliance

All staff members are required to comply with this policy and adhere to the procedures contained herein. Failure to comply may result in disciplinary action, up to and including, termination of employment.

Amendment and Review

The Know You Co reserves the right to amend, modify, or revoke this policy at any time, in whole or in part. Regular reviews will be conducted to ensure the policy continues to align with RACGP standards and keeps up-to-date with current relevance and effectiveness.