

BUTEYKO INSTITUTE OF BREATHING AND HEALTH (BIBH)

BIBH Complaints Policy and Complaints Management Guidelines

Introduction

This document sets out the policy and processes in place for the BIBH in relation to complaints management. It has been developed in accordance with the *Standards Australia Complaints Handling document (AS 4269 –1995)* which sets out the essential elements of the Australian Standard for the management of complaints and related guidelines.

It provides a complaints handling framework for complainants as well as complaint recipients and can serve as a reference document on issues where a common interpretation is desirable.

A comprehensive complaints system should:

- (a) Increase the level of client satisfaction and enhance the client/provider relationship
- (b) Recognize, promote and protect clients' rights
- (c) Provide an efficient, fair and accessible mechanism for resolving consumer complaints
- (d) Provide information to consumers on the complaints handling process for the Institute and services provided by BIBH Buteyko practitioners
- (e) Monitor complaints in an endeavour to improve the quality of Buteyko services.

It should operate against a background of a positive attitude towards consumers, commitment to resolving complaints at the lowest level and the following premise:

- (a) a client has the right to comment or complain
- (b) complaints provide feedback about a product or service experience and give the organisation the opportunity to address the concerns raised and regain or maintain confidence in its services.

Section 1 contains the essential elements for an effective process for BIBH while Section 2 contains implementation guidelines. Section 3 details complaint handling guidelines and Section 4 deals with minimizing and managing disputes.

Section 1. Essential Elements of Effective Complaints Handling by BIBH

COMMITMENT. The Institute and its members are committed to ensuring efficient and fair resolution of complaints and actively solicit feedback from clients.

FAIRNESS. BIBH processes must be fair both to the complainant and the BIBH/member(s) against whom the complaint is made.

RESOURCES. There shall be adequate resources for complaints handling with sufficient levels of delegated authority.

VISIBILITY AND ACCESS. The Institute and its members advise clients in writing regarding how to make a complaint and the BIBH complaints process. This information is in plain language, easy to understand and use, and includes information about the client's right to complain.

ASSISTANCE is available for complainants in the formulation and lodgment of complaints.

RESPONSIVENESS. Complaints shall be dealt with quickly and the complainants treated courteously.

CHARGES. Complaints handling shall be at no charge to the complainant, subject to statutory requirements.

REMEDIES. The Institute will seek to determine, negotiate or implement appropriate remedies when warranted.

DATA COLLECTION AND RECURRING PROBLEMS. The Institute and individual members will record complaints and their outcomes to identify and rectify systemic or recurring problems.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND REVIEW. The Institute maintains high standards of complaints handling and will regularly review its processes to ensure effective outcomes.

Section 2. Implementation of the Essential Elements

An important aim of any complaints handling process is to turn dissatisfied clients into satisfied clients. This is best done by speedy and effective remedies at the first point of contact, if possible.

Commitment. A commitment to responding positively to complaints and encouraging feedback allows practitioners, BIBH members, staff and clients to contribute to the improvement of the Buteyko services and BIBH operations.

Fairness. The process shall be based on the complainants right to

- (a) be heard;
- (b) know whether the Institute's policies and guidelines have been followed;
- (c) provide and request all relevant material to support the complaint;
- (d) be informed of the criteria and processes, including the avenues for further review, applied by the organization dealing with complaints;
- (e) be informed of the response of the person or organization complained of;
- (f) be informed of the organization's decision and the reasons for that decision;

- (g) know that the complaint can be reviewed independently, if necessary; and
- (h) confidentiality, if requested.

The person or organization about whom the complaint is made shall have the right to

- (i) amass sufficient detail about the complaint to enable that person or the organization to properly investigate and respond to the complaint;
- (ii) place all relevant material before the person investigating the complaint; and
- (iii) be informed of the decision and the reason for the decision if an independent review is necessary.

Resources. People are the single most important resource in the complaints handling process. It is important that BIBH members dealing with complaints are appropriately selected and provided with sufficient training and support to ensure that complaints are dealt with appropriately.

Other relevant resources people handling complaints for the Institute will need:

- easily accessed, detailed complaints handling procedures document or manual, - reference material (Australian Standards for Complaints Handling on which this policy is based)
- databases to record and store information on BIBH complaints
- equipment such as telephone, photocopiers, fax machines, answering machines
- access to all levels of the organization as necessary to solve a complaint.

Visibility and Access. Advice on how they can make a complaint should be provided to clients. Suitable mechanisms would include

- providing copies of a pamphlet dealing with complaints management in a prominent position in all BIBH members' offices and
- including the pamphlet or reference to that pamphlet in written notes provided to course participants.

The process described should be uncomplicated. Information should be in clear, easily readable print, and be easy to understand. Methods of making complaints should be flexible, not limited to one form of communication.

Assistance should be available from BIBH to someone wishing to make a complaint. Such assistance may take the form of an explanatory brochure, copy of BIBH complaints policy and processes document, telephone or direct contact, interview or correspondence. Other assistance could involve helping the client fill in a form, or obtaining interpreter services if the client has limited literacy or language skills.

Responsiveness. The BIBH should establish target time limits for all stages of the complaints handling process. Initial contact should be made with the complainant within 24 hours of a message or written complaint being received. A complainant should be told how long it will take to deal with a complaint and kept informed of progress, outcomes and reasons for decisions made.

Remedies. The Institute will consider remedies which reflect what is fair and reasonable in the circumstances, legal obligations and good industry practice. Such options include

- refunds (at the discretion of the individual practitioner)
- apology
- offer of further or substitute assistance or training
- referral
- information
- financial or other assistance.

Issues to be considered include

- addressing all aspects of the complaint
- following up where appropriate and
- whether it is appropriate to offer remedies to others who may have been affected in the same way as the complainant but did not make a formal complaint.

Data Collection. There is a need for a recording system to assist in monitoring the progress of complaints and to identify repetitive complaints. These types of complaints often indicate a fault in the service system which can be rectified. This system could be at the individual practitioner level (for their own practice) with discussion about and annual review of numbers and types of complaints received (and outcomes/how resolved etc) at BIBH meetings.

Information about complaints requiring handling at BIBH level will be documented by the Executive Secretary and become an ongoing record (in de-identified format) for future years.

The following information should be recorded for all formal complaints and situations where refunds are sought by clients:

- nature of the complaint, including business practices about which complaints are made
- response time (initial) and to resolution
- demographics
- source of complaint (client, health professional, other)
- action taken, including remedies/determinations/results and
- trends or recurring problems that might point to the need for system changes or training
- other relevant information such as details of condition/symptoms/severity prompting the client to seek assistance from a Buteyko practitioner.

Accountability and Review. Each BIBH practitioner should keep written (or computerised) records of all complaints received (see previous paragraph for format). Consideration should be given, at least annually, to review and consideration of complaints at both practitioner and Institute levels to determine the need for possible changes/improvements/training/other action to improve systems and outcomes.

Section 3 Complaint Handling Procedures

These Guidelines are for processing written or oral complaints, including telephone complaints.

Processing oral complaints.

- (a) Identify yourself, listen and respond courteously, record details and determine what the complainant wants.
- (b) Confirm the details received with the complainant in a positive way.
- (c) Do not attempt to lay blame or be defensive.
- (d) Explain the courses of action available if possible.
- (e) Resolve the complaint if possible or commit to doing something immediately, irrespective of who will ultimately handle the complaint.
- (f) Ensure that the client is informed the complaint is receiving attention, without creating false expectations.
- (g) Check whether the client is satisfied with the proposed action and, if not, advise alternative course of action if possible.
- (h) Provide acknowledgment, thanks and follow-up call for more information, if appropriate and to provide feedback on progress.
- (i) In some situations, it may be advisable to seek written clarification/confirmation of the complaint.

A written record should be made (see Section 3 *Data Collection* for format) of all complaints, contacts, discussions, outcomes etc.

Processing Written Complaints

In principle, this is the same as processing oral complaints. However, in this situation, a response should be given promptly in writing. Depending on the circumstances and degree of formality desirable, further actions/arrangements may or may not be provided or at least confirmed in writing. Even when a written complaint is made, a prompt phone call may, if well managed, enable a speedy resolution of the matter. If so, it is important that the nature and outcome of the call be recorded (and maintained for periodic review) and, generally, that the call be followed up by a letter to the complainant confirming action/outcomes/remedy as appropriate.

Section 4 Minimizing and Managing Disputes

Handling difficult consumers/clients and their complaints efficiently needs patience and skill to avoid initial 'negative' situations becoming even more negative and degenerating into disputes.

The two main elements in a complaint situation that need to be effectively handled to minimize the likelihood of dispute are:

(a) Dealing with the complainant's feelings:

- *Listen* - this is the first step in reducing tension
- *Acknowledge/reflect the complainant's feelings* – demonstrates that he or she has been heard - denying that the complainant is, or has the right to be, upset may antagonize the complainant. Empathy relieves tension and can open channels of communication.
- *Do not* offer excuses, or argue with the complainant.

(b) Dealing with the specifics of the complaint:

- *Ask the necessary questions in a polite and even-handed manner* – to obtain the most detailed response.
- *Agree on a solution*, if possible – without appearing to dictate terms in order to avoid the likelihood of re-raising tension.
- *Set a timetable* of action or steps to investigate or resolve the situation. If way forward is not immediately apparent, at least set a timetable to investigate, consider options, consult, refer to a higher level or independent review or arrange mediation, depending on circumstances.
- *Take action* on the agreed solution, keeping complainant informed on progress.

It is preferable to direct efforts towards satisfying the complaint rather than allowing it to remain unresolved and escalate into a dispute.

Where a solution to a complaint cannot be reasonably found at the initial point of contact, further procedures and remedies are available. Consumers should be advised of all options applicable to their circumstances. Options relevant to BIBH complaints are that they make their complaints to the following:

- . Individual BIBH practitioner/member/staff member
- . BIBH executive
- . External mediator
- . Court system

The fundamental characteristics of any dispute resolution system embody:

- (a) Early resolution
- (b) Accurate communication
- (c) Use of the least interventionist process first (usually the person or body to whom the complaint is directed), then staged intervention before the most interventionist (court) process
- (d) Time limits for each stage of the processes
- (e) Simplicity and easy access
- (f) Cost efficiency
- (g) Objectives which endeavour to satisfy the parties in dispute regarding fairness and reasonableness.