
The Centre for Compassion in Healthcare



17th September 2008.

Ron Paterson
Health and Disability Commissioner
PO Box 12 229
Wellington

Dear Ron

Review of Act and Code – proposed amendment

I write on behalf of the Trustees of the **Compassion in Healthcare Trust** who resolved at a meeting of the Trustees on 11th September to respond to your invitation to make comments in preparation for a public consultation document for review of the Health and Disability Commissioner Act 1994 and the Code of Health and Disability Consumers' Rights (The Code).

Recommendation

The Compassion in Healthcare Trust believes that the Code of Rights needs to be strengthened by including "***The right to be treated with compassion***".

Arguments for this amendment

The current Code includes "*the right to be treated with respect*" (Right 1), and the right for every consumer "*to have services provided in a manner that respects the dignity and independence of the individual*" (Right 3). However, the Trustees believe that these rights do not adequately express the core value at the heart of healthcare, which is the humane quality of understanding suffering and wishing to relieve it – expressed as compassion.

Few health consumers recall what was said to them, or what was done, in the course of healthcare treatment. However, everyone has a lasting memory of the emotional impact of that experience.

We all know of examples where clinical care was technically correct and performed to a high standard but where the emotional experience of the consumer was devastating. Conversely, we are familiar with cases where clinical outcome for the consumer was poor – either through the natural course of the illness or injury caused by healthcare error – but the consumer feels supported and cared for. The difference is the quality of caring and compassion shown by the healthcare professionals and administrators.

We suggest that the ultimate basis of many complaints to the Health and Disability Commission is an emotional injury as the result of perceiving practitioners or administrators to be uncaring, a sense of abandonment when things have gone wrong, a lack of apology and explanation, and a lack of compassionate and humane caring for consumers at their most vulnerable time. International evidence suggests that these defects in healthcare are very widespread and that a significant culture change is required in our healthcare institutions.



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The first step in any major change is to make a clear declaration of intent. For these reasons we believe it is important to include **“The right to be treated with compassion”** in the Code of Health and Disability Consumers’ Rights.

The Centre for Compassion in Healthcare is working alongside health professionals to strengthen the heart of healthcare. Many different strategies are required to increase awareness, to overcome fear, to enhance professional development and to create safer and healthier work environments for health professionals so that their own caring can be more compassionate. It is important therefore that our clinical and managerial leaders are assisted in this complex task by having standards in law which align with the core values of healthcare. We believe that compassion is a foundational value from which flows every other beneficial aspect of healthcare.

We also believe that there is a close link between compassion and patient safety, as you have highlighted in recent reports. Health professionals who bring open-hearted compassion to their practice are unable to be passive observers of system failures and patient risk. They feel compelled to act even if that means stepping outside normal professional roles. And when patients are harmed, they support and maintain a relationship of mutual trust that allows us to learn from mistakes.

The **Centre for Compassion in Healthcare** is rapidly gaining support and our call to strengthen the heart of healthcare is already having influence in several countries. In the United Kingdom, the Secretary of State for Health – directly encouraged by our example – has declared that henceforth, “compassion” will be a core value of the NHS and that the quality of compassionate caring shown by every nurse in the NHS will be measured by patient feedback¹.

We believe that healthcare professionals and the general public would support this change to the Code and we strongly recommend that you include this proposal in your public consultation document.

On behalf of the Trustees

Yours sincerely

Robin Youngson, Founder and Trustee

**Isabelle Sherrard, Trustee
Pat Armitstead, Trustee
Sharad Paul, Trustee
Joan Campbell, Trustee
Barbara Wickenden, Trustee**

1. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7460720.stm>

