

MALLEE DIVISION OF GENERAL PRACTICE

Community Participation Strategy

Introduction:

Our 'Consumer Engagement' nomination for the ADGP's Divisions Achievement Awards 2003 is not about a single community participation event. It describes a total community participation strategy that the Mallee Division has put in place designed to increase community participation in Division activities across the board. Whilst our community groups have participated in a number of specific activities, and some of these have been mentioned in this nomination, we are hoping that the selection panel will look at the broader picture that this submission is trying to paint.

The developmental stage of our community participation strategy.

In late 2000, following a lengthy period of debate at board level the decision was taken to press ahead with the development of a Consumer Participation Strategy. The Division's key criteria were:

- A strategy that provided real participation to a number of quite diverse communities across a large geographical area.
- A strategy that was manageable from the point of view of a relatively small Division with limited resources to support such a strategy.
- A real concern to ensure that the two quite large regional centers in the Division did not dominate the initiative.
- A belief that although a community representative on the Division's Board of Directors would be valuable, it was not the prime consideration.

The Division employed a local consultancy firm, 'The Write Approach' with the key objectives to develop a community based structure that would:

- Facilitate cooperation between GPs, consumers and communities in achieving effective and efficient primary care services within the Mallee Division.
- Provide a structure through which consumers and the communities within the Mallee Division can feedback issues of concern regarding the delivery of general practice services.
- Facilitate genuine community participation in the planning and development of the Division's programs.

After an extensive community consultation process the consultant presented the Division with a proposed methodology consisting of four key issues:

1. There was the need to inform the community about the proposal to establish a community participation strategy as an integral part of the Mallee Division of General Practice.
2. There was the need to ensure that the total community within the Mallee Division of General Practice's geographical area had the opportunity to participate in the process.
3. That it was the clearly expressed desire of the local community that they have the major responsibility for determining the community participation strategy that would be implemented.
4. It was essential for the Mallee Division to accept that the community participation strategy that would be developed would need to be adequately resourced to ensure that it achieved the outcomes the community and the Division were seeking.

When presenting these issues to the Board of Directors the consultant recommended that a two-tiered structure be established:

1. Community Focus Groups be established in 11 separate communities around the Division's area.
2. These Community Focus Groups would then determine the size and composition of a Division wide Community Reference Group made up of representatives of each of the focus groups.

The issue as to whether or not a community representative would join the Board of Directors would be an issue left up to the Community Reference Group. The Division's Board of Directors accepted the recommendation of the consultant, and so the Division's Community Participation Strategy was born.

Putting the Community Participation Strategy in place

Following the decision of the Division's Board of Directors to proceed with the establishment of a community participation strategy, the consultant set about the task of calling public meetings in 11 nominated communities around the Division. The communities were selected based on the fact that they all had existing GP services.

Of the 11 original communities targeted, nine went on and formed local groups, which have been meeting regularly since August 2001.

All community members of the nine groups were brought together for an Orientation Day in Mildura, facilitated by General Practice Divisions – Victoria. The group worked through a number of issues including a draft 'Terms of reference' document. They were provided information on the 'Divisions of General Practice Program' and the operations of the Mallee Division in particular. The last item of business on the day was to formulate a Community Reference Group, which would represent all the communities across the Division.

The community members agreed to leave the decision regarding a community representative on the Division's Board of Directors to a future meeting of the Community Reference Group. There was general agreement that a representative on the board, though desirable, was not the most pressing issue facing the new structure. As it has turned out the Community Reference Group did eventually appoint one of its members to the Division's Board of Directors and that position has been maintained to the present time.

Since the original formation of the Community Focus Groups, two have merged due to very similar community issues and one has joined with the advisory group at the local hospital. Following an approach from the Nth Mallee Primary Care Partnership, which was struggling to establish a community presence, three groups agreed to incorporate PCP community representatives into their structure. It should be pointed out that all of these decisions were made by the community groups themselves without any pressure from the Division.

It is clear that the community participation strategy has matured a lot since they were established. Whilst they are still prepared to tackle issues directly related to GP services and how they are delivered they are now involving themselves in much broader primary health care issues. It is also true to say that the community groups are more focused on finding solutions for health issues facing their communities and not just finding faults with what they have got. This is a very positive development, which should ensure the future success of the Division's community participation strategy.