



وزارة الصحة  
Ministry of Health

Guiding framework for the work of complaints  
management in health care facilities

# A RECOMMENDED GUIDELINE TO SUPPORT HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

The Patient Experience Center



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**The patient experience center would like to thank all those who participated in preparing the Complaint Management Framework in Healthcare.**

**Project preparation Phases:**

1. Assessing of the current situation
2. Report and recommendations of the current situation
3. The Complaint Management Framework
4. Generalization and training

**Parts Participation in the Preparation:**

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## PX message:

One of the healthcare facilities essential role is to create an environment that allows patients and their family's voice to be heard. Thus, the patient experience center is aiming to empower patients and families through enabling and assuring the development of an effective complaint management system. Building such a system will promote learning, identifies system gaps and embraces fairness and integrity in our decision-making processes.


The trust of patients and their families regarding a healthcare system is influenced by the presence of an effective and powerful process of receiving and handling beneficiaries' needs and inquiries. This includes, providing an effective and transparent complaint management process that allows people to access information on the complaint progress, updates on activities and outcomes of the process.

Patient's advocates encourage and appreciate complaints as an excellent source of information that supports the improvement and transformation of our healthcare systems. Besides, expressing empathy to patients and their families is a crucial factor to succeed in the efforts of creating a brighter image for the healthcare facility and increase the level of trust toward services provided by the facility.

Typically, patients and their families have a great understanding of their needs and have their perspective on the expected level of health care provided in a healthcare facility. A proper complaint management system can assist in answering number questions related to safety and quality of care. For instance, an excellent complaint management system could lead to identifying causes of adverse events, and thus, contribute to preventing them in the future. Additionally, better management of complaints can help in restoring trust and reducing the risk of escalating complaints to the level of litigation. To prevent such an unwanted risk, the healthcare facility should work toward enabling open communication and increase the level of the commitment to learn from mistakes.

Only a small proportion of dissatisfied people complain (less than 4 per cent). However, those in the remaining percentage share the bad experience they had with their family and friends and hesitate to either formally or informally express their dissatisfaction with the healthcare facility officials. A proactive approach of capturing patients' voice is a strategic way to improve the quality of care, whether through complaints, suggestions or comments.

In alignment with all the others published national guidelines and standards that intend to



regulate the process of managing customer's voice, this framework is to assist healthcare facilities when developing or improving their complaints management system and to ensure the effectiveness of such as system. The framework takes into account relevant policies of the Saudi ministry of health; (CBAHI) standards; Quality and Patient Safety incident reporting requirements, Just Culture Policy, and Disclosure policy. The framework built with consideration to human-centered care as indicated by Planetree principles and standards.

**Relationship with other standards:**

Complaints management framework in healthcare serves as a guiding principle to support the development of systems, policies and procedures related to complaint management. This framework developed in alignment with national regulations and standards as well as human-centered care and patient empowerment principles.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 The purpose

Beneficiaries' views regarding healthcare services are a crucial source of information and a real opportunity to improve healthcare delivery and outcomes. There are several ways where beneficiaries can present their views; they can be via either feedback, comments, or formal or non-formal complaints. While many healthcare facilities have a complaint handling policy and a way to collect and record complaints, they often fail to integrate the essential components of an effective complaint management system, leading to missing opportunities to improve the services based on the outcomes of the complaints, and thus, to have low patient's satisfaction rate. Therefore, it is essential to build an effective mechanism or a structured framework to govern the handling process of the beneficiary's feedback, or a complete framework that:

- Works as a reference for the complaint's handling officers.
- Ensures the fairness and the transparency of the complaints handling process for the beneficiaries and the community in general.
- To become a document that will be updated in a regular basis.
- Become a source on directing beneficiaries on how / whom and when to lodge complaints [9].

## 1.2 The aim

The aim is to build an evidence-based complaint management framework and standardize complaint management practices within healthcare facilities.

## 1.3 Background

The complaint management system is an essential aspect of the effort healthcare facilities make to ensure that all beneficiaries' complaints are dealt with, and additionally, it is an opportunity for these facilities to identify areas of weaknesses and work on strengthening them [10]. Most beneficiary's complaints are about the quality of the provided care or about the safety and harm that may be caused by the provided services. Patient safety-related issues are one of the concerns that patient complaint can capture [12]. A well-built complaints system will not merely aim at solving complaints, but also, to allow recording and systematically analyzing these complaints to come up with a permanent solution for these complaints and prevent their reoccurrence [11]. In the other hand, complaints that are not dealt with properly, delayed, ignored could play a negative role on the health facility reputation and the trust level of the beneficiaries for the provided services [10].



## 2 Definitions

### 2.1 The complaint:

The complaint defined as «the dissatisfaction, displeasure, disapproval or discontent expressed verbally or in writing by any person about the specific health services being rendered and or care being provided within the health sector» [9]. There are two types of complaints:

#### **The formal complaint:**

Formal complaint defined as the complaint submitted to the complaint-handling officer using an official form or verbal/written letter mentioning complainant's name, contact details, and signature.

#### **The non-formal complaint:**

Non- formal complaint defined as a step prior to a formal complaint. A complainant may verbally expresses his/her complaint publicly of an issue concerning health care services with no intension to complain.

Both formal and non-formal complaints go through the same process in the complaint management system.

### 2.2 The complaint-handling officer:

An employee who receive, collect, investigate, and respond to complaints. The complaint-handling officer can be a health professional or administrative professional who commits to follow a defined complaint management guideline and has the attributes required to fulfil this role.

### 2.3 The complainant:

A complainant is a person or entity who received service/ services from a health care facility and wish to complain.

## 3 Complaints Management System Framework

The essential components of an effective complaint management system are:

Commitment and leadership

Publicizing and engaging

Resources and enablement

Learning and action

Policies and governance

### 3.1 Commitment and leadership

Healthcare facilities must commit to create a culture that allows and encourage beneficiaries to complain and to share their experience. Leaders of healthcare facilities have to build the foundations of organizational learning, and one of these foundations is being committed to hearing beneficiaries' complaints [2]. A chief manager should support the creation of an excellent complaint management system and ensure the availability of adequate resources to support the system [2]. Senior managers within facilities must be committed to maintaining complaint management system and ensuring the availability of various channels, responding promptly and equitably to these complaints, and using the outcomes to create actions to improve the quality services provided by their healthcare facility [3]. The public awareness has to be increased regarding their rights to complain and to become familiar with channels used to lodge complaints.

#### 3.1.1 The Commitment and leadership principles

- Guidelines and policies concerning the complaint management have to ensure fairness, redness, and to deal with all complaints in a human center-care manner.
- Preventing any unnecessary delay in processing complaints and work consistently to improve the timeframe needed to finalize complaints.
- Establishing a rewarding system for the complaint handling staff to reward excellent handling of complaints and enhance the structure of excellence.
- Creating a non-judgmental culture while dealing with the complaint.
- Promoting the perception of being open to listening to beneficiaries and hear their complaints.
- Providing an easy to use complaint receiving system that characterized with several ways to complain.

### **3.1.2 The benefit of being committed to a working culture that supports complaints:**

- Providing a continuous assessment to the quality of care provided by the facility.
- Ensuring a high standard of quality and safety.
- Securing the patient right by giving them the chance to share their experience.
- In some cases, allowing beneficiaries to voice their concerns will prevent the situation to develop to a point where a formal complaint has to be made [1].
- Creating an environment that supports the cost-effectiveness of the care provided and redirect the financial resources to areas that will make different.
- The availability of excellent complaint management system contributes significantly to brighten the image of the facility and increases the trust in the services provided within the facility.
- Patient experience scores will positively be impacted.

### **3.1.3 The essential characteristics of a good complaint management system are as follows [2]:**

- Complaint handling system has to emphasize on building a blame-free culture.
- Complaint handling staff are engaged and empowered.
- Human-center care principles have to cover the whole complaint management process.
- Availability of appropriate documentation and archiving system of the complaints.
- Complaints are used for the sake of improving the system within the healthcare facility.
- Complaint handling staff armed with the proper training needed to handle complaints at best.
- Leaders are committed toward using the complaint management system data in improving the quality of care in the healthcare facility.

### **3.1.4 Learning and application:**

The complaint management system will allow healthcare facility leaders to view the blind and hot spot of inadequate or unsafe care and services in a facility [4]. The beneficiaries viewing angle will enlighten the management officers of any issues that have not been captured by the key performance indicators run in the facility for quality purposes. The following are tips to allow learning and to facilitate applying improvement projects out of complaints data:

- Both health care workers and beneficiaries have to understand that the complaint management system used mainly to fix any systemic issues together with seeking individual satisfaction and maintain patient rights.

- Complaints data need to be used as a benchmarking analysis, compared and contrasted with other indicators of the facility quality measurement tools [4].

<b>Summary of 3.1</b>
A healthcare facility is committed to receive public view regarding the facility provided services.
Public opinion regarding provided services and care are welcomed and play a role in shaping guidelines and policy.
Complaints are dealt with objectively, and both patient respect and dignity are preserved.
Actions have been taken to prevent any negative consequences that may be caused by making a complaint to the complainant.
All measures needed to prevent delays to respond to a complaint appropriately were ensured.

## **3.2 Publicizing and engagement**

Beneficiaries in healthcare facilities have to be considered as stakeholders, and thus, their engagement is a necessity. One of the tools to ensure their participation and engagement is to facilitate the way for them to be part of the complaint guidelines creation and evaluation. Additionally, it is essential to share all policies regarding the complaint management system guidelines with beneficiaries and with the community in general.

Some elements have to be considered while publicizing the policies, and they are as follow:

### **3.2.1 Clarity**

- The public has to understand how/where to complain.
- The healthcare facility has to widely publicize the guidelines using the best available methods such as the facility websites, social-networks, and visual materials within the facility.
- The language used to convey the message has to be easy to understand for the public and covers all languages spoken within the community.
- Using sign language and braille alphabet is essential to allow hearing the voice of the minority population who utilize these types of languages for communication.

### 3.2.2 Transparency

One of the main goals for the existence of complaint management policies is to ensure safe care delivery and to preserve beneficiaries' rights. Therefore, all measurement needed to maintain the transparency has to be taken seriously by healthcare facilities. Transparency has to cover all the processing points of the complaints, starting from publicizing the methods available to complain, up to the free access to all the information regarding the processing of individual complaints. Statistical data, such as reporting complaints overall outcomes and categories of the main reported complaints, could play a role in assisting beneficiaries overcoming the unsatisfied experience they may have in the healthcare facility [8].

### 3.2.3 Accessibility

The methods used to complain have to be explained for the general population in the community. Here are some tips that can assist in ensuring that:

- The simple and understandable language is used in all materials related to complaining lodgment, including forms or online portals.
- A simple process to complain.
- Ensure availability of assistance to people who may need it.
- Provide several ways to complain.

#### Summary of 3.2

It is clear for beneficiaries and public how/ whom/ where to complain.

Measures to maintain transparency were ensured.

The assistance was provided as required to both complaint management officers and beneficiaries.

Complaints can be accepted if they were provided from any source other than, the one mentioned in this framework.

## 3.3 Resources and enablement

Staff preparedness is an essential aspect in excellent complaints management system. It also works in preventing beneficiaries from constantly hearing that head-of-the office has to be consulted to provide a respond [5]. Here are tips to ensure proper staff preparedness:

### **3.3.1 Training:**

The staff has to be trained to become great communicator, be patience, have the knowledge about all services provided by the facility, being a good listener, and being creative. The combination of all of these skills will create a competent complaint handling staff. More importantly, the staff need to be aware of all the component of the complaint management guidelines. The high-quality level of training provided to staff reflect the commitment of the facility toward providing excellent handling of beneficiaries' complaints. The continuity of assessing the working process will facilitate addressing areas where training is needed to improve the work system.

### **3.3.2 Empowerment:**

Empowerment provides a sense of confidence to staff while dealing with complaints. It would prevent any delay caused by the need to obtain approval from a higher administrative level, such as the chief unit officer. Additionally, the empowerment will serve to improve staff skills, such as leadership skills. The staff's skills will grow and nurture by having a more extensive space to be creative in solving raised issues by beneficiaries. Strategies used to empower staff include [6]:

- Allowing staff to participate in decision making within the complaint management unit.
- Mentoring and the ongoing coaching by the unit manager to the team.
- Providing information and guidelines to staff will assist them to provide an informed decision.
- Creating achievable, measurable, and logical goals to incentive staff in achieving them.
- Establishing a culture that promotes trust.

### **3.3.3 Resources:**

All resources required to handle complaint have to be provided to the staff. The availability of these resources will facilitate the working process, decrease the time needed to process a complaint, and improve the quality of the outcomes. These resources include:

- An effective system
- Telephones.
- Computers and any portable devices that can assist in processing complaints electronically.
- Provide an appropriate archiving system.
- Proper infrastructure, such as building a complaint management unit that has a convenient and welcoming atmosphere.
- Access to meeting rooms, which will allow the complainant to discuss the matter concerning them privately.

- Offering water bottles, coffee and beverages to complainants.

### 3.3.4 Recognition:

Rewarding the employee who achieved pre-set of goals or provided excellent handling of complaints will enhance competition among the staff. Many other positives can be gained by recognizing and rewarding staff, such as:

- Increasing the number of resolved complaints.
- Inspiring the spirit of a teamwork culture.
- Enhancing creatively.
- Encouraging staff to attend training sessions to improve their performance, and thus, the quality and level of their skills.
- Increasing the motivation level among the staff.

#### Summary of 3.3

Rewarding and recognition system is available in a healthcare facility to reward excellent dealing with complaints.

Staff were provided with enough authorities to deal with complaints.

Necessary and appropriate training was provided for the staff handling complaints.

## **3.4 Learning and action**

Aside from improving beneficiaries' experience, one of the crucial goals of the complaint management system is to view issues within the health facility system, or issues concerning the quality of services from the beneficiaries' point of view. The complaint management system is one of the quality assurance methods, and it is an essential tool to improve the quality of services within the healthcare facility. The action regarding the complaint processing should never end up by responding to the complainant with the outcome of their complaint, but to work toward creating improvement projects to tackle the roots lead beneficiaries to complain.

There are some strategies to assist in utilizing the complaints as a valuable source of quality assurance tool, and they include:

### **3.4.1 High standard data archiving system:**

After responding to the complainant, the outcome of the complaint has to be archived and then analyzed. Each complaint has to have a file number containing all the demographical data of the complainant, overview of the complaint, detailed documents of all the undertaken investigation, involved parties, and outcomes of the complaint.

### **3.4.2 Analyzing complaints:**

Complaints have to be categorized into a set of categories based on the Saudi Healthcare Complaint Taxonomy and then are to be interpreted to create visual charts. Areas of strength and weakness in the system or the services are then to be addressed. Here are some facts that can be extracted from the data:

- The number of complaints within a given time.
- The highest and lowest reported complaints categories.
- Complaints trends.
- Demographical data of complainants.
- Area of care with highest/ lowest reported complaints.
- Locating any signs of improvement post intervening, in the case, where improvement projects were conducted.

### **3.4.3 Planning and execution:**

The analyzed data will draw a picture of the healthcare facility performance in conjunction with all other quality assurance methods. Then, the following stage is to build a plan aiming to improve the quality of care and services with the healthcare facility. The plan should consist of defined goals, timeframes, and KPIs have to be set to send a message that a proactive effort is taking place to reach the organizational goal of the healthcare facility in this regard.



### 3.4.4 Reporting and presenting the data:

The outcome of the analyzed data and all the improvement projects have to be shared by the healthcare facility. The insight of the Patient and Family Advisory Council has to be considered in this regard too. Side by side, regular reports of both complaints' analysis data and improvement projects outcomes have to be published by the healthcare facility to the general population. One of the critical factors leading to reach the healthcare facility goals successfully is the commitment of all healthcare employees to work as a team and to be accountable and responsible in receiving, resolving, learning and then acting on the finding of the reported complaints.

#### Summary of 3.4

The analyzed data of the complaints will allow drawing a clear picture of the facility performance regarding provided services regularly.

The combination of the outcomes retrieved from the complaint data analysis, together with all other quality assurance KPIs will assist in providing a comprehensive evolution of facility performance.

The good archiving system will ensure better storing of the data.

## 3.5 policies and governance

The component of complaint management policies for a healthcare facility should reflect on the facility committed to building comprehensive strategies to cover all the aspects of the beneficiary's voice. Clarity of the systems and its fundamental component will allow quick and smooth complaint processing. The complaint policies have to have stages where causes of the risen complaint are investigated, and action is made to prevent them from happening again [7].

### 3.5.1 Stages of complaint management policies:

- Receiving complaints and listening to complainants.
- Investigating and looking for the causes of the complaints.
- Appropriately respond to the complainant and open channels for them to appeal or escalate.
- Analyzing the complaint data.

- Acting upon the finding of the analyzed data to improve the quality of care and services.
- Evaluating the action taken to improve the quality of care.

### **3.5.2 Attributes of excellent complaint management policies are [7]:**

- Active involvement of healthcare facility leaders.
- Evidence of a beneficiary’s awareness about the complaint policies, including how, where, and when to complain.
- Proper training on how to handle complaints was offered to staff.
- Availability of a sound archiving system will serve in providing accurate data analysis.
- Fairness, redness, and justice were maintained at all stages of complaint processing.
- Reporting complaints analysis outcomes to the community to practice transparency.
- Evaluation of the policies is made regularly to ensure a high quality of complaints handling process.
- A survey was offered to complainant after receiving the response on their complaint to seek rating their satisfaction rate.

#### **Summary of 3.5**

Both employees and the public are aware of the complaint policies and are provided with printed copies of them

A complaint polices should cover all stages of complaints stages.

## 4 Self-Assessment tool

<b>Commitment and leadership</b>	
Complaint management guidelines are advocated by the senior management level.	
Staff are aware of the facility commitment to smoothly and promptly deal with complaints.	
If the complaint was lodge to complain about staff members, the staff understands that the primary purpose of the complaints system is to improve the quality of care and prevent unwanted issues reoccurrence.	
A rewarding system is established to reward staff who provide excellent handling of complaints.	
A system was built to prevent any negative consequences of the complainant caused by lodging a complaint.	
All necessary support was provided for staff handling complaints.	
<b>Publicizing and engagement</b>	
The action was made to ensure the wide-spreading of the complaint management policies among staff and the public.	
Complaint management system's materials are accessible and provided to the public in both away and language that is easy to be understood by the vast majority of the population.	
Population with special needs have received information about the complaint management system in a way and language that suite their needs.	
There are many channels for the complainant to lodge complaints.	
Healthcare facility routinely seeks public feedback regarding the complaint management system and process.	
The healthcare facility has a system that allows complainant who is dissatisfied on the response of their complaint.	
A system was built that allows a complainant to complain about the way complaints are processed.	

### Resourcing and enablement

All needed authorities to properly process complaint were granted to staff handling complaints.	
Staff handling complaints were informed about the extent of the authorities they had while processing the complaint.	
Communication skills and passion are attributes that describe all staff handling complaints.	
Proper training was provided for staff handling complaint to process complaints properly.	
Staff handling complaints have been provided with the needed knowledge to deal with all the spectrums of the population they serve.	
All resources required to deal with complaint adequately were provided to staff, such as policies and materials resources.	
There is a system to ensure archiving, retrieving, and responding to complaints.	
Staff handling complaint is supported by additional staff if they needed.	

### Learning and action

There is a high priority within the complaint management system for the recording and archiving.	
Complaints data are analyzed, and outcomes are reviewed on a regular basis.	
Complaint analysis outcomes are utilized to improve the quality of care provided.	
Reports regarding complaints management system operational issues, analysis outcomes, and improvement project recommended are all shared with the senior managers of the healthcare facility.	
Healthcare facility employees, stakeholders, and the public are presented with all report of complaints and complaints have driven improvement project on a regular basis.	
Recording and archiving policies were introduced to the staff handling complaints.	

## Policies and governance

Efforts were made to create complaints management policies and guidelines within the healthcare facility.	
The complaints policies are evident to support the staff handle complaint properly.	
All the employees, stakeholders, and the public are aware of the complaints policies.	
Regular review of staff handling complaints adherence to the complaint policies and training are provided to manage any issues with compliance to the polices.	