OBJECTIVE: To describe and characterize the work of independent complaint offices for users of psychiatric services and of ombudsmen in psychiatric hospitals. METHODS: Nationwide survey addressed to all independent complaint offices and to all psychiatric hospitals in Germany. RESULTS: The authors were able to identify n = 37 independent complaint offices. About 50 % (n = 215) of the hospitals surveyed reported having a patient's advocate ("Patientenfürsprecher"). While complaint offices are regularly staffed by psychiatry-experienced, their relatives and professionals, patient's advocates are often retired employees of the respective hospitals. Among the most frequent complaints were complaints about the behaviour of psychiatric staff towards patients and complaints about the correctness or necessity of treatments and constraints. Ombudsmen were additionally faced with complaints about food and sanitation in hospitals. CONCLUSIONS: Patients' complaints can be used to improve psychiatric services. However, the existing complaint management system in German psychiatry should be improved with respect to publicity, user acceptance and accessibility.