Community Health Volunteer Program Sustainability – Literature Review

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1. Background

HEALTH CARE PERSONNEL SHORTAGES

Globally, countries are experiencing severe healthcare shortages with a need for nearly an additional 4.3 million licensed practitioners and healthcare workers worldwide.1 Several low- and middle-income countries have begun task-shifting in an attempt to alleviate the strain on the health care system.2

Task-Shifting involves transferring responsibilities normally assigned to formal health care personnel to health care volunteers or less formally certified individuals. Increased task-shifting has led to numerous countries investing in community health volunteer (CHV) programs.3

COMMUNITY HEALTH VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

Numerous programs have achieved success in utilizing CHVs to bridge the gap between community health and facility provided healthcare.3

• A CHV program in Brazil reported a 32% decrease in infant mortality five years after program commencement.4

• A CHV program in South Africa reduced loss to follow up for cervical cancer screenings in the following time frames:
  - 6 month follow up: 21% to 6%
  - 12 month follow up: 39% to 10%
  - 24 month follow up: 50% to 24% 4

• Several initiatives have demonstrated the effectiveness of utilizing CHVs to increase community access to health information, education, and referral.2

PROGRAM SUSTAINABILITY has been questioned due to the high attrition rates seen in most CHV programs which undermines the quality of care delivered and functionality of the programs.2

2. Aim

EXPLORE the experiences, motivations, and reasons for attrition in community health volunteer programs. Understanding these fundamental factors could allow for improved sustainability and functionality of these programs.

Increasing the efficacy of community health volunteer programs could significantly augment access and quality of care in countries that are faced with staggering personnel shortages.

3. Methods

Literature Review

• Peer-reviewed articles from 2000-2018
• Twenty-nine articles were found to be relevant
• The following search engines were used:
  - PubMed, google scholar, CINAHL

• Key Words:
  - CHV, CHV sustainability, CHV experiences, CHV motivations, task switching
  - Criteria for Exclusion:
    - Outside time frame, published in language other than English, not relevant to aim of review

4. Conclusions

SUSTAINABILITY

The long-term sustainability of volunteer run healthcare initiatives are questionable. However, the overall success of CHV programs in certain settings has been demonstrated.5,4 Several programs have had success in bridging the gap between community health and facility-based care in low-resource settings.2 With clearly defined roles CHVs are able to provide health information, sanitation advice, and specialized health counselling to the communities they serve.3

As seen, CHVs are an intrinsically motivated group of individuals that highly value personal growth, serving their community, and the recognition they receive from these roles.2 Finding ways to enhance the intrinsic motivations of these programs has the potential to increase sustainability significantly.

REASONS FOR ATTRACTION

Concern about the long-term sustainability of community health volunteer programs largely stems from the high turnover rates in such programs.2 One of the most common reasons for leaving the CHV position is lack of remuneration or insufficient compensation.5 However, many countries created these positions and began task shifting because they could not afford to hire licensed healthcare professionals. Therefore, providing compensation might not be possible and could undermine the ultimate goal of alleviating the strain on the health care system.

LIMITATIONS

Although common themes were witnessed across the spectrum of studies, each CHV program needs to be considered in a separate context in which it is initiated. There were experiences, motivations, and reasons for attrition that were cited but were not discussed here because they were less common across the literature. The lack of studies providing raw and first person CHV experiences might decrease the external validity of the data. Future studies need to be conducted including personal anecdotes from volunteers to better understand their viewpoint.

5. References

5. Oliver MJ, Winters N, Regu, Mbaik SM. What do community health workers have to say about their work, and how can this inform improved programme design? A case study with CHW’s within Kenya. Glob Health Action 2015;8(5716). PMC-ID:PMC442123.