

The Contribution of the Health Extension Program in Promoting Comprehensive Primary Health Care in Tigray, Ethiopia: the case of maternal health.

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Abstract:

Background:

Community health workers are widely used to provide care for a broad range of health issues. Since 2003 the government of Ethiopia has been deploying specially trained new cadres of community based health workers called health extension workers (HEW) through a national program called health extension program (HEP). Very few studies have investigated the contribution of these community health workers and HEP in improving utilization of maternal health services and the extent to which the program involves community for health care and collaborating with other sectors.

Methods:

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. A pre-tested structured questionnaire was used to interview 725 randomly selected women with under-five children from three districts in Northern Ethiopia. We investigated women's utilization of family planning, antenatal care, birth assistance, postnatal care, HIV testing and use of iodized salt and compared our results to a previous national survey from 2005. The qualitative assessment was mainly to describe the extent to which HEP is involving community and collaborating with other sectors. We did a total of 8 FGDs and 15 in-depth interviews.

Results:

HEWs have brought considerable improvement in women's utilization of family planning, antenatal care and HIV testing. However, there is no visible improvement in health facility delivery, postnatal check up and use of iodized salt. Women who were literate (OR, 1.85), listened to the radio (OR, 1.45), had income generating activities (OR, 1.43) and had been working towards graduation or graduated as model family (OR, 2.13) were more likely to demonstrate good utilization of maternal health services. Place of residence, age and year of enrollment into the HEP were not associated. Community participation in and acceptance of the HEP is high and is backed by strong government commitment. Qualitative findings have also showed a strong intersectoral collaboration between the HEP and other sectors.

Conclusion:

The HEP and HEWs seem effective in several aspects, but professional help during delivery remains an important problem. More effort is needed in order to reduce the high maternal mortality rate. Strengthening HEWs' support for pregnant women for birth planning and preparedness and referral from HEWs to Midwives at health centers is recommended. Women's participation in income generating activities, access to radio and education could be targets for future interventions. The existing strong community involvement in HEP and intersectoral collaboration should be strengthened and maintained.

Key Words:

Health extension workers, community health workers, utilization, maternal health services, income generating activities, community participation, intersectoral collaboration