

Abstract

TITLE: The Gauteng Province Community Health Worker Programme: The extent to which it contributes to the provision of comprehensive primary health care

BACKGROUND

Addressing the growing disparities within health care has increased the effort internationally to revitalize the practice of primary health care (PHC) within health systems. These efforts include attempts by developing countries to meet the Millennium Development Goals and the global community's rethinking on strengthening PHC to support efforts to meet these targets. In implementing PHC, South Africa has a history of utilizing community health workers (CHWs) as a means of providing health services to poor communities.

OBJECTIVE

To examine the extent to which the services provided by CHWs in Gauteng Province, are contributing towards comprehensive primary health care (CPHC) focusing on inter-sectoral action and community participation as strategies to provide this service.

METHODS

This qualitative study employed a comparative case study design, contrasting the experiences of 3 different community health worker organizations. Multiple qualitative methods were used (key informant interviews; focus group discussions; participant observations; and network maps), including in-depth interviews with policy-makers involved in the CHW sector. A triangulation of these methods assisted the in-depth understanding of the difficulties of implementing CPHC in a complex policy environment.

RESULTS

The findings highlight the complex nature of inter-sectoral collaboration as they are played out in the different levels of government and local community structures. They illustrate the experiences of CHWs (and patients) in their attempt to facilitate inter-sectoral action and community participation in the quest to provide CPHC services. More importantly, the findings highlight how attempts to provide this model of service in poor communities achieve limited outcomes due to the limited mechanisms of social support to meet the more immediate needs. South Africa's mission to improve access to care and to address the growing disparities in health has led to the current process of revising its health policies; including the revision of the policy regarding CHWs. Interviews with policy-makers indicate that the current policy on its own is not adequate.

CONCLUSION

The study provides insight into the role of this workforce and the need for an enabling environment in CPHC with the view of informing policy. It contributes to the growing body of knowledge with regards to the variety of CPHC models that exist in various countries so as to learn from the models and the experiences thereof.