

Strengthening Health Systems and its Impact of Community Health Workers on Maternal and Child Health

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ABOUT THE STUDY

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are often the link between the healthcare system and underserved populations, particularly in Maternal and Child Health (MCH). These individuals, who are typically members of the communities they serve, are trained to provide need health services and education. Their involvement has proven to be a critical factor in improving maternal and child health outcomes, especially in low-resource settings where access to traditional healthcare infrastructure may be limited.

Role of CHWs in maternal and child health

CHWs play a vital role in improving maternal and child health outcomes. Their work involves providing essential health services and support, particularly in underserved and remote communities.

Maternal health education and support: One of the most important roles that CHWs play in MCH is in providing education and support to pregnant women. Maternal health is critical for both the mother and child, and CHWs can help to ensure that women receive the necessary care and information during pregnancy, labor, and post-partum.

Pregnancy and prenatal care: CHWs are often involved in encouraging and facilitating prenatal care visits. They help pregnant women understand the importance of early and regular check-ups to monitor the health of both mother and child. Through education, they inform women about the signs and symptoms of complications like preeclampsia, gestational diabetes, and infections, and provide information about proper nutrition, hygiene, and prenatal vitamins.

Labor and delivery preparation: During pregnancy, CHWs also assist in preparing women for childbirth by educating them on what to expect during labor and delivery. They offer advice on creating birth plans, explain the signs of labor, and inform women about the different types of delivery options available, including hospital birth, home birth, and birthing centers.

In addition, CHWs can provide emotional and mental support to pregnant women, preparing them psychologically for the challenges of labor and delivery. This support can significantly reduce anxiety and improve overall well-being during the pregnancy.

Postpartum care: These is critical for both mother and child, and CHWs play an essential role in ensuring that mothers receive the care they need after childbirth. They offer guidance on issues such as breastfeeding, family planning, postnatal exercises, and maternal mental health, which are vital for a mother's recovery and the well-being of her infant.

Child health and development

The health of the child during the first few years of life is critically important, as this period is when most childhood deaths occur due to preventable causes such as malnutrition, infections, and improper care. CHWs are integral in reducing child mortality and promoting healthy child development.

Immunization and preventive health: CHWs play a vital role in promoting immunization by educating parents about the importance of vaccinations and ensuring that children receive the necessary immunizations on time. They may also assist in tracking vaccination schedules and providing reminders to families.

Maternal and child mental health

Mental health is a growing concern in MCH, with conditions like postpartum depression affecting many new mothers and emotional well-being being an important component of child development. CHWs can help raise awareness of mental health issues and provide support through counseling or referring women to mental health services when needed.

In the case of children, CHWs can provide information on the psychological aspects of child development and offer guidance to parents about promoting a nurturing and stimulating environment for their children. By offering early interventions, CHWs help address mental health issues before they escalate.

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Health systems strengthening

CHWs play an important role in strengthening local health systems by ensuring that healthcare services are accessible and responsive to the needs of the community. Their work not only improves maternal and child health directly but also contributes to the overall efficiency and sustainability of healthcare systems.

Health advocacy and community mobilization: As community-based health workers, CHWs are in a unique position to advocate for improvements in maternal and child health services within their communities. They act as liaisons between the healthcare system and the community, ensuring that local health needs are communicated to policymakers and healthcare providers.

Data collection and monitoring: Accurate data collection is vital for improving healthcare delivery and tracking maternal and child health outcomes. CHWs often assist in gathering data on the health of mothers and children, including birth weights, vaccination rates, and the prevalence of common diseases. This information helps health systems identify gaps in service delivery and areas that need improvement.

Community Health Workers are an indispensable part of improving maternal and child health outcomes, particularly in underserved areas. Their roles in education, advocacy, health services, and community mobilization contribute significantly to better health outcomes for mothers and children.