

Role of Community Health Workers in Rural India

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Abstract: *The most recent World health report focuses the world's attention on human resources as the key ingredient to successful health systems functioning and it highlights the growing human resource crisis, particularly in low-income countries. Shortages of skilled health workers, particularly in underserved areas, have been identified as a key facet of the growing human resource crisis. These shortages are driven by a number of factors: the dramatic increase in demand for health workers in high-income countries that has created a tremendous pull of health workers into these countries; increasing morbidity, mortality and absenteeism rates, coupled with increasing workloads due to the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic; and inadequately funded and poorly managed and performing health systems, which lead to deteriorating working conditions in many underserved areas, creating a strong push factor.*



“You treat a disease, you win and you lose. You treat a person, I guarantee you, and you’ll win, no matter what the outcome.”

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization characterizes CHWs as members of the community, selected by and answerable to the community they work for, and supported by the health system but with shorter training than professional health worker. Increased health care costs and demand have accelerated the need for resource-saving approaches that improve access to and delivery of primary care services. We define community health workers in primary care (CHW-PCs) as trained individuals with limited to no formal medical education who provide patient-facing support and services in primary care. CHW-PCs carry out functions that are person-centered, support team-based care, address social determinants of health, and promote health care access, patient engagement, and outcomes.

CHWs are incorporated into the health system to assist doctors and nurses in activities such as immunization and health promotion. In this sense, they are considered ‘another pair of hands’ as they are helpful in rendering services to underserved populations and they increase the capacity of the health system to address financial and human resource shortages in a resource-poor setting. As activists, CHWs have been conceptualized as social and cultural intermediaries strengthening the interface between the existing health system and the community. In this sense, their role should facilitate community participation and involve engaging in the necessary actions to address the social and cultural barriers that lead to poor health.

Health workers who worked amongst low-income communities of wealthy countries or amongst communities

from poor countries shows evidence of CHWs’ contribution to reducing child morbidity and mortality, increasing uptake of immunization and promoting good breast feeding practices. Systematic reviews report that CHWs in low-income countries (such as Bangladesh, Brazil and Nepal) have demonstrated the capacity to improve antenatal, perinatal and post-partum service utilization and to prevent perinatal and maternal deaths by early recognition and referral of complicated pregnancies. Due to these successes and the increasing recognition of the crisis in human resources for health, deployments of CHWs have become a popular strategy to delivery primary health care at the community level. Many countries in Southeast Asia and Africa including India are planning and implementing CHW programmes at a national scale to strengthen primary health care systems.

The Responsibilities & Impact of Community Health Workers

Community health workers perform a wide range of vital healthcare roles in their communities:

- A) They supervise the treatment of patients living with terminal illness so that they can live healthier and longer lives. In Health, community health workers work to ensure that HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (TB) patients take their medications correctly and regularly in order to prevent them from developing drug resistance or worse yet, to prevent fatal side effects arising from the misuse of these medications.
- B) They serve as counselors, helping poor patients overcome the barriers that prevent them from seeking

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vital healthcare. Patient barriers to care include transportation, lack of awareness, fear, and healthcare costs. Community health workers are knowledgeable about local needs and sensitivities, and thus are in a position to gain their patients' trust and to bring them to the clinics to receive medical treatment.

- C) They act as healthcare educators, providing vital education about the healthcare options that are available. By leading education campaigns in their communities and raising awareness among community members regarding health issues, community health workers encourage community members to take charge of their own health.
- D) They keep a lookout for people who show signs of developing a serious condition. Identifying and treating a disease at an early stage makes it less dangerous and less expensive to treat, thereby reducing the overall financial burden on the healthcare system.
- E) They possess indispensable knowledge about the challenges faced by patients who seek healthcare. Since they make daily rounds to the homes of the patients and accompany patients to the clinics, community health workers understand first-hand the unique needs of the local patients. They also see the effects of illness and poverty in their community. Their insights are important for shaping healthcare policies and healthcare delivery methodologies.
- F) They provide treatment to patients in their homes so that they do not have to risk catching or spreading disease in a hospital or clinic.
- G) CHWs promote access to services, provide health education, support care delivery, and promote advocacy. The specific role of CHWs in rural health programs is dependent on Services provided through the program, such as:
- Advocacy
 - Outreach and enrollment
 - Navigation
 - Education
 - Health services
 - Social-emotional support
- H) Required CHW skills, such as:
- Communication
 - Interpersonal
 - Cultural competence
 - Assessment
 - Training
 - Professional
 - Advocacy
 - Education
 - Facilitation

Advantages of Community Health Workers in Rural Program's

Community health workers (CHWs) help to connect community members to available services and resources. They provide benefits to individuals, communities, providers, and payers. Since CHWs are often members of the communities they serve, and rural communities typically have strong community connections, CHWs have a greater opportunity to:

- a) Develop trusting, one-on-one relationships with patients

- b) Act as a liaison between providers, patients, and families/caregivers
- c) Gain support from other organizations serving the community
- d) Strengthen care coordination by connecting patients with available healthcare and social support services
- e) Extend the reach of healthcare providers and services
- f) Deliver services that are appropriate based on the patient's language and culture

2. Conclusion

By contributing to the delivery of primary and preventive care, CHWs may facilitate improvements in health status and quality of life in rural communities. These impacts can be greatly increased when CHWs are fully integrated into the primary care team, working alongside physicians, nurses, and other clinic staff. CHWs can also help reduce the caseload of the limited number of rural healthcare professionals. Incorporating CHWs into the healthcare team frees up resources and enables rural healthcare professionals to focus on more complex patients and issues.

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