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Parallel session 1: User fees - removal and exemptions

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User Fees in Zambia: behaviour and experiences of communities and health care providers

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Aim and Objectives

In Zambia, user fees were removed in April 2006 in rural and July 2007 in peri-urban centres. Preliminary information collected during ad hoc visits to health facilities suggests that trends in utilisation of facilities alone do not give sufficient detail on the effect of implementation of a user fee removal policy to inform future policy, whether at regional or national level. A qualitative study is underway to provide a deeper understanding of the impact of user fee removal at health centre to individual level.

Methods

The presence of both fee paying and non fee paying facilities serving the same populations allows for comparisons to be made. Rural and urban facilities as well as those situated near national borders are included in the study. The study design is cross-sectional and descriptive using a series of qualitative methods that include the use of key informants to guide the direction of data collection; in depth interviews at health facility and household level; group discussions with key stakeholders; and observations within the health facility and at household level. Themes and concepts are identified and data triangulation identifies only those concepts that can be validated through a combination of data sources.

Results

Results indicated that neither cost sharing nor user fee removal policies were implemented at facility and district level as intended. Of concern, non adherence to the clause exempting certain categories of patients, more especially those unable to pay was evident. The impact of increased utilization reported in many facilities after the user fee removal policy on the health of the population was unclear. When cost sharing policies were in place deaths associated with inability to raise the fees were reported. However, the circumstances associated with increased utilization suggest that the benefit to both individual patients and the health system in general is in question.