Factors enabling and disenabling the services provided by community health workers: Case study of two health districts in South Africa

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Background

As part of strengthening primary health care, the South African government has introduced ward-based outreach teams to work in under-served communities. In these communities, community health workers (CHWs) give health talks and refer health cases to primary health facilities for care. However, available literature highlight poor supervision, shortage of equipments and limited community link as some of the challenges confronting this cadre of workers in the communities.

As the SA has started implementing the NHI, these challenges need to be corrected because CHWs form part of the workforce that will continue to link needy people to health care under the NHI.

Aim

This study aimed to explore the experiences, successes and challenges of community health workers in two health districts in South Africa in the context of the NHI.

Methods

We employed qualitative approaches to recruit and interview study participants who comprised of, facility managers, CHWs and their team leaders and community leaders were interviewed to gather insights of experiences, successes and challenges that they encounter in providing primary health care services at community level.

Findings and conclusions

CHWs serve as the main link between vulnerable members of society and the health care system. Despite this, we found out that CHWs face a number of challenges including lack of working tools, insufficient supervision and non-integration of their services to the health care system. This limited the efforts they put in place to help those suffering at the community.

We argue that integration of CHWs into the main health care system through provision of necessary tools and appreciation of their work will not only boost their morale in serving the community but improve the access to care for the vulnerable.

Key words: community health workers, primary health care services, experiences, challenges