

Daily activities of Community Health Workers: Exploring roles related to non-communicable diseases in an urban township, South Africa

Abstract

Community health workers (CHWs) are increasingly being recognized as a crucial part of the health workforce in South Africa and other parts of the world. CHWs have taken on a variety of roles including community empowerment, provision of services and linking communities with health facilities. Their roles are better understood in the areas of maternal child health and infectious diseases (HIV, malaria and TB). This study therefore, seeks to explore the current roles of CHWs working with non-communicable diseases (NCDs). A qualitative naturalistic research design utilising observations, in-depth and unstructured interviews was conducted. Findings of the study show that CHWs have multiple roles in the care of NCDs. They act as health educators and promoters, advisors, rehabilitation workers and support group facilitators. They further screen for complications of illness and assist community members to navigate the health system. These roles are shaped both by expectations of the health system and in response to community need.

This study shows the complexities of the work done by CHWs working with NCD-related conditions. Thus, understanding the actual roles of CHWs provides insights not only into the competencies required to enable them to fulfil their daily functions but also into the type of training required to fill the present gaps.