

PREVENTION OF HYPERTENSION AND DIABETES IN AN URBAN SETTING IN SOUTH AFRICA: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

Hazel A. Bradley, MPH; Thandi Puoane, DrPH

The project aimed to identify factors that contribute to hypertension and diabetes and to design and implement appropriate local interventions to prevent these noncommunicable diseases and promote healthy lifestyles.

This was a community-based participatory action research project in which researchers and community health workers (CHWs) were the main participants. The triple A approach to planning interventions was used, that is, the process of assessing the situation, analyzing the findings, and taking action based on this analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed. Twenty-two CHWs working in site C, Khayelitsha, a deprived urban area of Cape Town, South Africa, participated in the study.

Findings from the situational assessment indicated a lack of knowledge among CHWs and the community about hypertension and diabetes and the risk factors for these noncommunicable diseases. Economic constraints and cultural beliefs and practices influenced the community's food choices and participation in physical activity. On the basis of these findings, a training program was proposed that would provide CHWs with the skills to prevent hypertension and diabetes in their community. A program was developed and piloted by the project team. A health club that focuses on promoting healthy lifestyles is currently being piloted.

This paper illustrates the unique involvement of CHWs in a successful participatory action research project on the prevention of hypertension and diabetes and promotion of health in a deprived urban setting. The project emphasizes the importance of involving local people in community-based initiatives to promote health and identifies that the primary role of health services is to develop appropriate skills in the local community, monitor activities, and facilitate a link with primary health services. (*Ethn Dis.* 2007;17:49–54)

Key Words: Community Health Workers, Developing Country, Diabetes, Health Promotion, Hypertension, Noncommunicable Disease, Participatory Action Research, Prevention, South Africa

From the School of Public Health, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa.

Address correspondence and reprint requests to Hazel A. Bradley, MPH; School of Public Health; University of the Western Cape; Private Bag X17; Bellville 7535;

INTRODUCTION

Noncommunicable diseases are traditionally associated with developed countries and affluent populations. Recent evidence has shown, however, that the prevalence of these conditions is rising in developing countries and that the burden is increasingly moving to persons of lower socioeconomic status.^{1–3} Data from South Africa indicate that the burden of noncommunicable diseases, particularly diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, such as hypertension and stroke, is increasing in the urban Black African population.⁴ This increase in prevalence of hypertension and diabetes is attributed to increasing urbanization and other risk factors.^{5,6} Rising globalization and economic and social development have contributed by exposing this population to a variety of “fast foods,” most of which are high in fat—especially animal fat, salt, and sugar.^{5,7–8} Changes in dietary consumption, along with a decrease in physical activity and other environmental factors, have contributed to an increase in obesity in this population.⁹

Recognition of the particular role diet and physical activity play as risk factors for noncommunicable diseases led to the development of the World Health Organization Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health in 2004.^{10,11} In South Africa, both the national and Western Cape provincial health departments have identified the promotion of healthy lifestyles as a priority, and strategies on diet and physical activity are being developed to tackle the problem.^{12,13}

South Africa; +27 21 9592630; +27 21 9592872 (fax); hbradley@uwc.ac.za

Role of Community Health Workers in Noncommunicable Diseases

Community health workers (CHWs) are a cadre of health workers, primarily in developing countries, whose main roles are promoting health and outreach work in their communities.¹⁴ CHWs are usually selected by the communities in which they reside and work for non-governmental organizations (NGO), from which they receive a salary or stipend. They typically undergo training in basic health care, health promotion, disease-specific techniques, and home-based care.¹⁵ Their work has mostly focused on communicable diseases, which are usually major causes of death in the areas where they work, and noncommunicable diseases have featured minimally. However, increasing prevalence of noncommunicable diseases, such as hypertension and diabetes, in developing countries has necessitated exploration of the role of CHWs in prevention and management of these conditions.^{1,4}

Participatory Action Research

The aim of participatory action research (PAR) is to bring about change that has a positive social value, for example, a healthy community.¹⁶ PAR is an emergent process, and the project design evolves over time.¹⁷ PAR uses a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods, including mapping, model making, creative drama, and photography.

One of the key features of PAR is that it involves the active participation of the people whom the research is intended to assist as an integral part of the study. Participation and involvement of the community in research has been widely discussed in PAR literature, especially with regard to the level and type of