

Involving the public in public health work

Public health is a multidisciplinary endeavor involving broad array of professional contribution within health sector and beyond. However, experience has shown that successful public health interventions need more than the mere involvement of professionals; engagement of the general public becomes fundamental in this respect. Yet, the history of consulting with the public in health care matters is complex with all connotations as to the benefits and weighting of public views⁽¹⁾.

The public is an umbrella term referring to everyone who is not part of the organization or the professional team⁽¹⁾. It includes members or representatives of various groups with issues pertaining to public health practice. The term 'involvement' refers to a range of methods that public health professionals can use to engage the public in their work⁽²⁾.

Public involvement in public health is justified by two main considerations⁽²⁾. First, it should be seen as a principle to enable people to understand and influence public health practice for better health outcome. In this way, engagement promotes democracy, social equality and development of disadvantaged communities. Second, people involvement can improve quality of public health activities. For instance, people who experience disease as patients usually have insight that health providers do not have. The public also sees health care from a different perspective and could provide useful suggestions to complement efforts of the professional team in aspects such as problem identification, prioritization, options for implementation and success measurement. Public involvement could also lead to service acceptability and mobilization of support for the desired interventions.

The professional team should carefully plan public involvement. This entails defining the objectives for involvement, identifying the constraints, deciding whom to involve and specifying the method of involvement to get the most out of the public. Good practice examples to help health professionals with involving the public include the willingness to listen, explicit invitation of people contributions, use of plain language (avoiding jargons) and public relation skills.

Public consultation is resource-intensive and it should be taken seriously to obtain the desired

results. People contribution must be valued and health professionals should keep people informed about the process and outcome of health interventions if the interest and thrust of the public is to be maintained.

References

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